

THE
Empty Box
AND
Zeroth
Maria
2

EIJI MIKAGE

ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO

VISIT...

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THE
Empty
AND Box
Zeroth
Maria
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EIJI MIKAGE

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Kazuki Hoshino

A youth with a borderline irrational attachment to keeping his life as normal as possible. Unfortunately, he also has become the favored object of study for O, a mysterious being who gives Boxes that can grant any wish.

Maria Otonashi

The beautiful, determined young woman who was trapped with Kazuki in the years of endless repetitions within the box known as the Rejecting Classroom. She is pursuing a box for her own purposes.

April 7 (Tuesday)—Declaration

"I think I made some declaration once, saying I would always be beside you no matter how much time passed, and it looks like that oath is still in effect."

The other students have cleared a circle around us as if we're in the eye of a storm, and Maria stands at its center and says to me:

"I am Maria Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

No longer would she call herself Aya Otonashi, the name she'd used within the eternal loops of the Rejecting Classroom.

And why would she? There's no need for her to assume an illusory identity anymore.

Still... I can't help but wonder.

"I'm not strong."

Where's the girl who said that to me?

What happened to the girl who expressed her vulnerability on the day of that very first transfer?

No one knows that girl. No one will ever meet her.

That's why I'm having trouble knowing what to call this "Maria Otonashi" before me now.

April 23 (Thursday)—Classroom

Daiya Oomine

An arrogant, short-tempered young man with silver hair and earrings. Nevertheless, he has the brains to back it up, and Kazuki can count on him when the chips are down. A childhood friend of Kokone Kirino.

Haruaki Usui

A lighthearted member of the school baseball team and a bit of a class clown. As a friend to Kazuki, he is both easygoing and fiercely protective.

Riko Asami

One of Maria Otonashi's many newfound fans after her speech at the entrance ceremony. A stubborn and bright young girl.

Ryu Miyazaki

An all-around top student and the ever-reliable president of Kazuki's class.

"Watching whatshername here has really taught me a lot. Self-centered persistence truly is the most miserable thing in the world," Daiya says, making pointed eye contact with Asami.

"...Are you trying to start something?"

"What? Do you mean to say you're fully aware of how selfish your behavior is? You're more hopeless than I thought."

"Y-you...!"

I'll never know how Daiya gets away with talking to everyone like that...

"Ha-ha-ha, he's just trying to warn you that Maria might get sick of you if you keep following her around!" Haruaki tries to offer a helpful comment, though I'm not sure what he expects it to accomplish.

"Shut up! Where do you get off acting like you know what she thinks, idiot?" Asami snaps.

Haruaki responds to the outburst with a few gentle pats on Asami's head, an oddly kind smile on his face.

"Don't treat me like a child just because I'm short! And don't touch me!"

Haruaki ignores Asami's protests and keeps his hand on her head.

"Ugh... Nothing ever gets through to this guy..."

"That's right. Nothing you say will ever get through to me!"

"That's not something you should be proud of, really..."

At that moment, I become aware of someone observing the three of them from afar.

Miyazaki, the class president, has been watching this little comedy unfold with obvious distaste.

He suddenly glances over at me before flatly stating:

"I truly envy how much fun they always seem to have."

A detailed illustration of a young woman with long, dark brown hair tied in a high ponytail. She is wearing a red, long-sleeved top and is shown from the chest up, looking down with a distressed expression. Her hands are clasped together near her face. In the background, there is a digital clock showing '29' and some plush toys, including a brown bear and a yellow character.

Kokone Kirino

Kazuki's cheerful and outgoing friend and one of the most popular girls in the class. She has apparently known Daiya Oomine since preschool, but perhaps there's something more to their relationship...?

I hang up the phone.

My heart pounding out of control, I jump on the bed and bury my face in a pillow.

“What do I do...? What do I do, what do I do?!”

I'm trembling and starting to lose it as I shout into the pillow.

It's not bad, necessarily. If it were, I wouldn't be this confused.

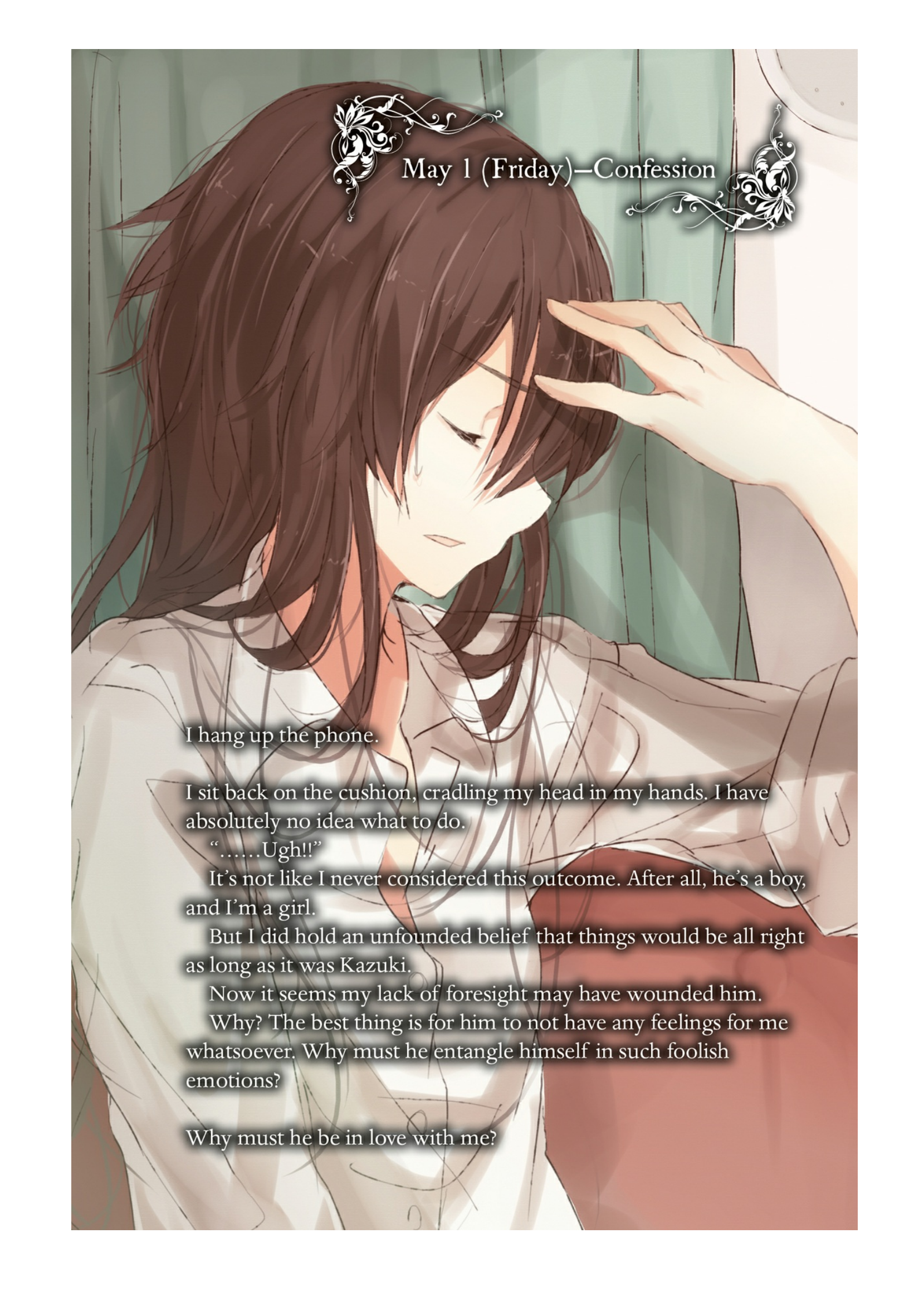
It's just that I always thought of him as a friend. There's that line between us in my mind.

But I guess Kazu isn't satisfied with that anymore...?

I only wish he had said something sooner. I wish he had brought this up before it could ruin what we have and make things more difficult for us both.

Why did he have to go and say it now...?

Why did he have to say he loves me?



May 1 (Friday)—Confession

I hang up the phone.

I sit back on the cushion, cradling my head in my hands. I have absolutely no idea what to do.

“.....Ugh!!”

It’s not like I never considered this outcome. After all, he’s a boy, and I’m a girl.

But I did hold an unfounded belief that things would be all right as long as it was Kazuki.

Now it seems my lack of foresight may have wounded him.

Why? The best thing is for him to not have any feelings for me whatsoever. Why must he entangle himself in such foolish emotions?

Why must he be in love with me?

...What
is
happiness,
really?



Designed by Toru Suzuki



THE
Empty
AND Box
Zeroth
Maria
2

EIJI MIKAGE
ILLUSTRATION BY TETSUO



New York

Copyright

The Empty Box and Zeroth Maria, Vol. 2

Eiji Mikage

Translation by Luke Baker

Cover art by Tetsuo

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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I'm in the midst of sights I can remember only in dreams.

I already know who's standing before me. However, since I refused to take the Box, I have no means of consciously remembering any of this when I'm awake. I have no idea when this conversation took place, either.

"Do you recall what I said to you before? About how I can't tell any of you humans apart, yet for some reason you catch my eye?"

I don't understand. I feel like I have heard this, but also like I haven't.

"Well, thanks to this last incident, I'm beginning understand why—the reason I can differentiate you from the rest of your kind. Perhaps it's because you don't reject anything, but at the same time, you don't accept anything, either."

That just sounds like wordplay to me.

"That 'normal life' you're always going on about is not the 'normal' other people see. To you, even things you wouldn't mind parting with are part of that 'normal life,' right? Other people can't *accept things for what they are* the way you do."

The speaker smiles while saying this to me.

"Humans are all distorted. What a person perceives as normal is warped and twisted by their own values. So, you could say my Boxes allow someone's biases to encroach upon others. This is why you are so sensitive and averse to the intentional distortions of the mundane created by their use. Am I wrong?"

I have absolutely no idea what they're talking about. I wish they would just leave me alone.

"This time, it was applied directly to your very flesh. Yet despite this, you managed to maintain your identity without falling under the sway of the owner's values because you can recognize other people's perversions of reality for what they are. And once you're aware of the distortion, you naturally refuse to accept it. The thing is, your ability to sniff out these abnormalities far exceeds that of any regular person. That is the reason why... *you don't accept anything.*"

All I can do is scowl in confusion, but they still don't let up.

"Your powers of perception are so very limited compared with mine, yet I can't deny this unique capacity of yours. Hmm, yes... It could be that you and I are rather alike."

I want them to stop.

I find them completely repulsive.

When I tell them as much, they smile, and this being who can resemble everyone and no one takes the shape of someone I know all too well.

O now looks exactly like me, Kazuki Hoshino, and speaks.

"Perhaps this is why it's said the ones who resemble you are the ones you hate the most?"

No.

We may appear identical, but we're nothing alike.



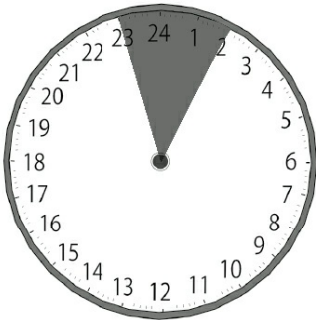
April 29 (Wednesday) Showa Day

April 29 (Wednesday), 12:02 AM

The start of the first day.

April 29 (Wednesday), 11:57 PM

The end of the first day.



April 30 (Thursday)

April 30 (Thursday), 12:00 PM

The start of the second day.

April 30 (Thursday), 12:37 PM

It's lunch break.

A yawn escapes me, probably because of that bizarre phone call I received at six in the morning.

"I'm going to make you a bento for lunch today."

She hung up before I could answer.

What was that all about...?

It's the last day of April, and the rest of society is kicking off the long Golden Week holiday, and our own school vacation is fast approaching. I'm standing in the hallway waiting for Otonashi as usual. We eat lunch together pretty much every day, but this is the first time she's ever made food for me.

"Hey, Kazu! I heard all about it! You have a little bento event-o coming up with Maria today, don't you?"

There goes my peace and quiet. Kokone sweeps around in front of me with Haruaki grinning ear to ear right beside her.

"...I thought I told you not to tell anyone since it would cause a stir, Haruaki," I grumble.

“You can give me orders, but whether I follow them is entirely up to me!”

This guy truly is the lowest of the low.

“Anyway, Kazu, tell us all about this little lunch event of yours!”

“...Uh, well, I don’t really know much about it myself. I just got a call this morning, and...”

“She called you in the morning? You two must be so in love!”

I wish she’d let me finish.

“She called him in the morning...,” someone mutters behind me, and I turn around.

...Oh, great, here comes even more trouble.

“Oh, morning, Riko-rin,” Kokone called.

“Hello...”

The girl with the strange nickname, courtesy of Kokone, is Riko Asami, a petite, short-haired first-year student. She’s in the same class as Otonashi and one of her many fans thanks to that speech at the school entrance ceremony. Normally, Asami and Otonashi come to school together, but today it seems Asami got to class first. Maybe it’s just me, but she looks and sounds darker than usual.

Asami is staring at me with empty eyes.

“...Um, okay?” Is she mad at me about something?

“I’ve heard some things. Like how Maria is making you lunch today.”

“U-uh, yeah. It seems that way.”

My answer provokes no response from Asami except more silent staring.

“.....I wish your cell phone battery would explode... I hope it’s one of those dodgy batteries they sell for supercheap in other countries... It should just swell up bigger and bigger...!”

All that mumbling under her breath gives me goose bumps, like she’s putting a curse on me.

“A-anyway, I wonder why Maria chose you, Kazu?” Kokone interjects with a smile, perhaps hoping to dispel some of the tension. “You know, some of the other boys in school have been shooting you some pretty scary looks lately. I even heard they’ve got a list of guys they wanna kill and make it look like an accident. You’re right at the top!”

“What the hell kind of list is that...?! Who says that...?”

“Me, for one.” Haruaki raises his hand. “I cast my vote just like the rest. The thought of you getting all touchy-feely with Maria really grinds my gears!”

I sag in exhaustion.

I know Haruaki, at least, is joking, but I have definitely noticed some of the other guys at school giving me the stink eye recently. I don’t think my relationship with Otonashi is the only thing bugging them, though...

“Huh? What’re you looking at, Kazu?”

“.....Nothing.”

I wonder if Kokone knows. Does she understand that all this friendly conversation between us is also probably part of why everyone has it in for me?

Kokone inclines her head quizzically at my attitude. She recently switched up her hairstyle from the way she wore it during that near-eternal March. Now she pulls her hair up on the side instead of in the center. I guess you’d call that a side ponytail?

“Hey, I’ve been wondering for a while now, but how exactly did you manage to tame Otonashi?”

“‘Tame’...? That’s not a very nice way of putting it.”

“C’mon, she must be used to guys coming on to her, so I’m sure it took more than your average pickup line to snag her. You must have convinced her it was fate and made her believe ‘Oh, this guy’s special.’” With a triumphant tone, Kokone starts letting her imagination run wild as if she’s got it all figured out. “That’s gotta be it... Maybe you saved her from some pervert... Yeah, it’s definitely within the realm of possibility. Some sicko probably came after her like, ‘Hey, your belly button lint smells sooo nice! And what’s this?! Do I spy a

bit of crust here, too? I—I definitely don't mind a bit of crust in my belly button!!' And then you saved her from his filthy clutches, I know it!"

"I hate to break it to you, but I don't think I have what it takes to face off with someone as twisted as that... Besides, Otonashi and I aren't even dating, you know."

That's the undeniable truth, but my rebuttal only makes Kokone's smile widen.

"Okay, then how do you explain what happened at the entrance ceremony? Huh? Huuuuuuh?"

"Th-that was just..."

She's speaking of the "declaration" Otonashi made at our school entrance ceremony this year. I can understand how that might have sparked some misunderstandings. I have to find some way to explain things to Kokone that'll wipe the grin off her face.

"O-Otonashi is just kinda crazy like that."

"...I'm crazy like what?"

I know that voice. I turn around in terror.

It's Maria Otonashi.

I can't help but freeze as I see her face, but not because my blood is running cold at what she said. I'm tense because I didn't have time to steel myself before my eyes landed on her sculpted features.

Otonashi is unbelievably beautiful, and I *still haven't acclimated* to her aloof manner. I can't help but be nervous when she's nearby. I count to three in my head, as I always do when I prepare myself to speak with her.

We've spent nearly an entire lifetime together. I'm well aware of that. *It's just that none of that time seems real to me anymore.*

"Why are you so tense? Did you think I'd be angry with you? You know it takes more than that to upset me."

"Y-yeah."

As I stand there flustered, Asami quietly shuffles around until she's behind Otonashi.

"...Huh? What is it, Asami?"

Asami stares at me as before without making a reply.

Haruaki speaks up instead. "There's something off about her today. I'm sure it has to do with this bento incident, like she thinks you're going to snatch dear Maria away from her."

".....Quit talking like you know her. You should show her more respect....."

Asami is snarling under her breath again, her gaze downcast.

"Enough of this. Let's go, Kazuki."

"You mean to the cafeteria?"

Otonashi lets her breath out in undisguised exasperation. "Why can't you understand what I was getting at when I said I would make your lunch today? The cafeteria is no good."

It isn't?

Otonashi and I meet every day for lunch, mostly so we can discuss O and the Boxes.

That said, it's not like new information on those topics crops up every day, so we rarely speak of anything that isn't meant for the ears of others. I say "rarely," but truthfully, we haven't had a top-secret conversation even once since Otonashi came to this school.

But for some reason we can't meet in the cafeteria today.

"Oh, I get it. That's why you made me a bento... We could've bought some bread or something at the cafeteria, though," I answer quietly.

Otonashi leans in close and whispers in my ear. "I had more than my fill of the bread they sell here during my stay in the Rejecting Classroom. I'm sure you know what I mean..."

Yeah, I guess, but... I can understand why she wouldn't want anyone to hear the words "Rejecting Classroom," but why would she be so obvious about

getting close to me in front of Asami? Seems like rubbing it in.

Casting a quick glance at Asami, I realize her gaze has sharpened even more.

“Um, Maria? Can I come along today, too...?”

“Sorry, Asami, but today I want to eat alone with Kazuki.”

“Alone with...”

“Let’s go, Kazuki.”

Otonashi takes me by the arm and leads me away. Completely failing to read the situation, Haruaki can’t resist a whistle.

...I wonder what Asami thinks of all this.

I glance behind me in curiosity and see that she’s staring at the ground and whispering something under her breath.

“.....I wish some big fat female cockroach all bloated with eggs would crawl in your mouth and lay the entire clutch in your stomach... I hope they hatch and the babies eat you alive from the inside out.....!”

She’s scaring me!

April 30 (Thursday), 12:43 PM

“Being behind the school like this brings back memories, huh?”

This spot around back of the building was home to many of our talks within that endlessly repeating realm.

Apparently, Otonashi isn’t particularly sentimental about that, because she only shoots me a quick glance and, indifferently, removes a cloth-covered bento from her bag and hands it to me.

“...Th-thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I unwrap the bento and open the lid. Nothing too remarkable, but somehow not quite what I expected.

I decide to try the asparagus wrapped in bacon first, popping a piece in my mouth.

...Yep, the taste is pretty standard, too.

“Uh...the bacon asparagus tastes really good.”

“It was frozen.”

...Ah, okay, now I get it. That explains why it’s so nondescript.

I go for the hamburg steak next. Naturally, it looks and tastes completely ordinary.

“...Um, the hamburg is good, t—”

“Also frozen.”

...Thought so.

I scan the bento to see what else is on the menu. I’m willing to bet that the fries, meatballs, dumplings, and mixed veggies all came straight from the freezer.

“Don’t try so hard to consider my feelings. There’s no need to compliment me on any of this.”

“...So you never cooked the whole time you were in the Rejecting Classroom?”

During all those time loops, Otonashi had learned martial arts and a bunch of other skills, so I figured she must have tried her hand at cooking as well.

“What, are you chomping at the bit to inform me of how terrible I am in the kitchen?”

“N-no, that’s not what I meant...”

“Of course it is... Not that I care, though. I did cook. I even learned to make some rather elaborate dishes. It’s just that I never found it particularly enjoyable. I was never able to find the same fun in mastering cooking as I did with other skills.”

“And that’s why your bento sucks.”

“I see you’re finally being honest.”

Whoops.

I risk a peek at Otonashi's reaction... She doesn't seem angry, at least.

"I have to ask: Since you're not interested in cooking, does that also mean you aren't into food in general?"

"Quite the contrary. I'm very happy when I eat something that suits my palate."

"What's your favorite food, then?"

"Strawberry tarts. I like most pastries made with straw— Hey, why are you sitting there with that meatball sticking out of your mouth?"

"Uh, it's nothing..."

Who would've thought she likes something so cutesy? I can see Otonashi liking something like sweet potato youkan jelly, but strawberry seems completely unlike her. ...I'm on the verge of saying so, too, before I think better of it and keep the thought to myself. That was a close one.

"Heh, it takes some nerve to decide someone's preferences don't suit them."

"...I never said that."

"Oh? Then who were you thinking of? She seemed more likely to enjoy sweet potato, I believe?"

...How did she figure out something that specific?

"So you like eating, but not cooking."

I try to shift the topic to something less dangerous for me.

"I don't find much pleasure in eating food I prepare myself. It just feels like work."

It goes without saying that there was no one for Otonashi to share her culinary skill with in that interminable world. Even someone like me who hardly ever spends time in the kitchen understands that half the fun of cooking is seeing the joy of others when they eat your handiwork. Without someone to share your cooking with, it would seem like a lot of work for nothing.

"...Enough about that. I didn't bring you back here to talk about this nonsense."

“O-of course not.”

“Let’s get down to business.” With that, Otonashi rifles through her bag and pulls out her cell phone. “I got a message in the middle of the night.”

“A message?” I parrot back at her.

Otonashi wordlessly shoves her phone up to my face. The message on the screen reads: *My wish has been granted. Now you and I can be together.*

...Okay, what the heck is this? It looks like the sort of thing people would send just after they started a relationship. Hmm? Does this mean Otonashi is seeing someone? *Her*, of all people?

Looking over at Otonashi, I see her smirking at my reaction.

“Anyway, I knew what was up from the moment I met you today. Check who the sender is, Kazuki.”

I do as she says. After the word “From”...

“Huh?”

...it says “Kazuki Hoshino.”

Wait, so I sent this? ...No way, that’s impossible! I don’t remember that at all. But clearly, someone must have sent it, right...?

“At first, I thought maybe someone was spoofing your account, but I filter all my messages, so that didn’t seem likely. Naturally, I have to assume it did in fact come from your phone.”

“But, Otonashi, I don’t remember sending this at—”

“How about we take a look at your sent messages box, then? It should be in there, unless you deleted it.”

I nod and pull out my phone. After a quick check, I find the e-mail in question.

“My wish has been granted. Now you and I can be together.”

There it is, verbatim.

“B-but...” My blood curdles.

“Calm down, Kazuki. One look at your face is all I need to know that you didn’t

send this message of your own volition. The thing is, if this is the work of someone else, they would've had to use your phone sometime after two in the morning to send the message to me."

The message is dated the thirtieth, so it was sent at 2:23 AM today.

My phone would've been lying next to my pillow then. Otonashi's call woke me up this morning, so I'm positive on that detail at least. That suggests that whoever sent this sneaked into my room sometime after two this morning. But why? Why would anyone go to the trouble of doing that...?

"Kazuki," Otonashi says to bring me back into focus. "I forced my way into the Box known as Rejecting Classroom before, right? How do you think I was able to do that?"

"...Huh?"

I can't grasp what she's trying to tell me.

"It has something to do with what we're talking about now. *I was able to force my way in because I'm a Box myself*—that's how I explained it before, but that still doesn't directly correlate to the reason I was able to actually enter the Box, don't you think?"

"...Now that you put it that way, you're right."

"I have the ability to sense other Boxes and track them down. I also have the ability get inside one once I find it."

"...I see."

"So someone sent this message from your phone to mine at a little after two in the morning, or at least they made it seem that way. There are probably several methods, but I have a theory." Otonashi lays out her hypothesis. "It was done using a Box."

...A Box?

"Are...you sure? Why would someone go to the trouble of using a Box to do something like that?"

"I already told you, Kazuki. I can sense their presence... True, as you say, the Box may have nothing to do with the actual message itself, but I am absolutely

certain of one thing.”

Otonashi fixes me with something bordering on a glare as she continues.

“Someone nearby is using a Box at this very moment.”

More than her words, her steady gaze leads me to finally understand what’s starting to occur around me.

It’s happening again.

Another Box is about to ruin my normal life.

“Let’s get back to the message, Kazuki. Assume it was created using the power of a Box. If so, what does it mean? It would be a bit too optimistic to presume the owner had only a simple prank in mind once they gained power, don’t you agree?”

“...Meaning?”

“It’s a declaration of war. Or possibly just a statement of truth.”

“...Truth?” What kind of truth? It’s not like Otonashi is going to start dating the owner or anything.

“It could be a metaphor of some sort. Another possibility is that the Box has been used to ensure this future comes to pass. One thing is for certain, however...” Otonashi takes a small breath before continuing, “Whoever the owner is, *their use of the Box directly involves the two of us.*”

Yeah, that has to be right. There’s no reason why they would use my phone to send Otonashi that message if things were any other way.

“...So what should I do?”

“I know without a doubt that a Box is in play, so my first order of business is to pinpoint exactly how it’s being used and then determine its nature. I want you to assist me. You’re sensitive to anything out of the ordinary, no matter how minute, right? You may be able to pick up on slight disturbances I wouldn’t notice.”

“Okay, I understand. I’ll be on the lookout.”

“Thanks. I’ll be in touch if I find anything.”

Assuming our little chat is over, I return to my lunch. But I pause again once I notice that Otonashi hasn't started eating again herself.

"Is there anything else we need to discuss, Otonashi?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I suppose so," Otonashi continues somewhat awkwardly. "It doesn't really matter, but I can't get over it. It's troubling me, so I'll just get it off my chest."

"...Okay, go ahead."

"Why do you address me differently now?"

"Huh?"

Talk about a strange question out of the blue.

"...If there's no particular reason, that's fine." With that said, Otonashi resumes her lunch.

I'm curious why she asked, but like she said, it probably doesn't matter, so I get back to eating, too.

April 30 (Thursday), 10:38 PM

Slight changes in my daily life.

I rack my brain as I sit at the same desk I've been using since elementary school, but I can't come up with anything at all. *Changes*. Aren't things always changing in life?

I know I'm not going to get anywhere this way, so I flip open my cell phone.

On the screen is a picture of Mogi in her pajamas—a bit thinner than before, but not painfully so. She's in her hospital room making the peace sign, with a smile as bright as a sunflower.

"Ewww, what're you grinning like that for, Kazu? You must be looking at porn!"

I hurriedly turn off my phone as soon as I hear my sister, who's three years older.

"N-no, I'm not!"

“Ooh, you’re so upset! Seems awfully suspicious to me!”

With a stupid grin, my older sister, Ruka Hoshino, climbs up to the top bunk of our bed. Looks like Roo is in her underwear again. Sheesh... Even though she’s almost twenty, she still runs around the house half-dressed all the time. I’m a high school second-year, so I’m pretty much an adult, too, you know.

“Oh, I know! Maybe you were looking at a picture of Kasumi Mogi!”

“Wha...?!”

How does she know?!

“Uh-oh, does that mean I’m right? Eh-heh-heh...”

“H-hold on, now. How do you know about Mogi...? Hey, have you been looking through my phone?!”

“Nope. I just saw her name on the screen when she called you once, so I guessed whatever pics you were looking at must be of her... Either way, you’re a bit of a perv, aren’t you, smiling at pictures of girls like that.”

This is exactly why I hate having to share a room...!

I grab my phone and dive into the bottom bunk so she can’t see the panic on my face.

“So tell me, is she your girlfriend?”

“N-no!”

“So what’s going on between you two? Or should I ask—how do you feel about her?”

“.....Um.”

What *is* going on between us...? How do I really feel about her?

I remember she once confessed her feelings for me in the Rejecting Classroom, and if she’s sending me photos like this, she probably still does like me, just a little... Probably.

The prospect isn’t entirely unpleasant.

But...I honestly don’t know any more than that. All the emotions I had within

the Rejecting Classroom are long gone. It's possible I used to have feelings for Mogi, too. I recall doing things that would imply I did. But maybe that's precisely why I can't have a completely unfiltered view of her. I have no way of knowing how honest my emotions are in my daily life now.

"Well... Let's, uh, let's just say she's a friend."

That answer took a lot of deliberation, but there's no response. *That's strange*, I think, straining my ears only to hear my sister snoring away softly.

...I always think this, but she falls asleep way too easily.

I realize I still haven't sent a reply to Mogi, so I begin typing one out. I check the time in the corner of the screen: 10:59.

I'm in the middle of writing when suddenly, I black out.

April 30 (Thursday), 11:18 PM

All right, time to make that call.



May 1 (Friday)

May 1 (Friday), 8:14 AM

Kokone gave me the cold shoulder when I said good morning to her today.

Normally, she's the one approaching me, but for some reason, she's keeping her distance, almost on purpose, and talking to our other classmates. Her eyes dart over my way every so often, though, almost as if she's frightened of me.

I have absolutely no clue what's going on here. What in the world could be causing her to act like this? At this rate, I probably won't get to enjoy a nice chat before class with my friends, so I munch on a cheese Umaibo so I have an excuse not to talk to anyone.

"Did you do something to Kiri?"

That's Daiya for you—firing off the question point-blank without a care in the world for the inner workings of my heart.

"...Not that I know of."

"Huh... Okay then, let me fill you in on a little secret."

"A secret?"

Does Daiya know what's gotten into Kokone this morning?

"It's the first time she's had to take exams during her first year of middle school. She got too into studying the night before and ended up going into the tests with barely any sleep. Well, since she wore herself out, Kiri ended up nodding off during her third-period exam. Nobody would've noticed if she'd simply breathed like other people do when they drift off, but nope, that idiot had to start sleep-talking in the middle of a silent classroom. She was like: 'I can't fit into the plugsuit; it's too tight...'"

"...Uh, Daiya? Why are you telling me this?"

"Why do you think? I'm giving you some heavy ammo to use on Kiri. It takes a lot to make her dislike someone. Now's your chance to really get her to hate you and break away from her for good. You're almost there now. All you need to do is mention what I've just told you, and you're home free."

“Um, that’s not exactly what I’m hoping for, to be honest... Besides, that story sounds more cute than embarrassing to me.”

“Well, that’s where the cuteness stops. It gets even more hilarious. You still have yet to hear about her epic drooling.”

I suspect I’m not going to like what comes next, so I shut my mouth and try to plug my ears. Unfortunately for me, Daiya is too quick and yanks my hands away from my head.

“No, I don’t want to hear any more!!”

“That’s not it; forget about that crap. Take a look over there.”

I turn in the direction Daiya is pointing and find Otonashi talking with a male student outside the classroom door. She looks like she’s in a foul mood, to say the least.

Facing off with her is a boy with intelligent almond-shaped eyes behind a pair of black-framed glasses: Ryu Miyazaki, our class president. Unlike Daiya, who was chosen as the first-year president because of his test scores, Miyazaki actually takes his role seriously. He’s a model student but not a stick-in-the-mud, and he’s pretty much universally popular with everyone in class as a leader we can count on.

I sidle up to the two of them with more than a little reluctance. Truth be told, I find it somewhat difficult to deal with Miyazaki’s overwhelming confidence sometimes.

“...What’s going on?” I ask, and the two turn to face me.

“Oh, it’s you, Kazuki. I’m trying to enter the classroom, but he won’t let me through.”

“Of course I won’t. What makes you think you can just waltz right into the homeroom of your upperclassmen? It would be another story at lunchtime, though.”

Now that he mentions it, Otonashi almost never comes here aside from lunch break. She was probably trying to show at least the bare minimum of decorum.

“All you want to do is drag Hoshino off somewhere, right?”

“What I do with Kazuki doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, it does. Don’t forget that I’m the class president. Part of my duties is to watch over my classmates. Besides, first period is about to begin. If he goes off with you, he’ll be late for class.”

“As if I care. He and I have something more important to attend to.”

For a moment, I have no idea what Otonashi’s talking about, but I soon realize that only one thing could be so important.

It must have to do with the Box. That takes priority over everything else for me, too.

“Um...hey, Miyazaki? I, uh, actually do need to go,” I say.

Miyazaki knits his brows and begins staring intently at me, like he’s sizing me up. I can’t help but recoil under such an unforgiving inspection.

“Do you do whatever Otonashi says?”

“N-no, but...”

“You’re pathetic. How about you try thinking for yourself instead of letting some girl drag you around like a dog on a leash?”

“Hey, who the hell do you think you are? You talk as if Kazuki has no will of his own.”

Otonashi jumps into the fray. The corners of Miyazaki’s mouth twitch upward in a smirk at her rebuttal.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you mad at me for insulting your lover boy here? Oh, or maybe you didn’t like the implication that you’re selfishly leading him along by the nose?”

“You...”

Otonashi’s glare is ice-cold; Miyazaki’s smile is thin.

“If you’ve got something to say about it, then—”

“You’re doing this on purpose.”

Miyazaki stops short at Otonashi’s words.

“Your position as class president is a rather poor excuse for giving us so much trouble, don’t you think? Nothing we did ever bothered you before, so why now all of a sudden? You’re practically on the verge of stopping us by force. Are you trying to come up with some shoddy premise to keep bothering us from now on?”

“...I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“That’s all well and good, if you actually don’t. I can’t help but get a bit edgy in these situations, so it jumped out at me. If I’m mistaken, we can let it go at that, and if not, I can keep you in check.”

In stunned silence, I watch the two of them go at it. Where did that come from?

“Let’s go, Kazuki.” And with that, Otonashi leads me away.

“Uh, okay...”

Miyazaki quietly gazes at Otonashi’s grip on my hand with a slightly wooden expression. Normally, I barely have anything to do with him, so it does seem odd that he would come after us like that.

Otonashi leads me out of the classroom and straight into Haruaki, who seems to be returning from a trip to the bathroom, along with Asami, who must’ve come here hot on Otonashi’s heels.

“Yo, what’s up, Hosshi? You guys eloping or something?”

“.....Eloping.....”

Thanks to Haruaki’s incurably clueless remark, Asami’s gaze latches on to our linked hands. It slides up a little, until her narrowed eyes are considering me... It’s really freaking me out.

“Hey, what’s the matter, Rikocchi? You’re acting weird today,” Haruaki comments.

That nickname would usually bother Asami, but today, she only has eyes for me.

“A-Asami has been kinda off since yesterday, Haruaki,” I reply.

“Huh, is that so?” Haruaki really is an airhead if he can forget yesterday just like that.

“...Miss Maria.”

“Sorry, but we don’t have time today.”

Otonashi brusquely dismisses Asami with barely a glance before turning away, leaving the other girl hanging her head in dejection.

Without moving a muscle, Asami begins muttering to herself.

“.....I hope the people on those hidden message boards drag your name through the mud... I hope they bury you under a pile of photoshopped pictures that strip away every last shred of dignity you have...”

Hey, come on now, it's not my fault Otonashi is in such a bad mood!

May 1 (Friday), 8:31 AM

We’re back behind the school, just like we were yesterday.

“I’m sure you already know what I want to talk to you about,” Otonashi says, leaning against the wall.

I swallow and nod. She must have discovered something new about the Box someone’s been using recently.

“I have a few questions for you.”

“Okay.”

“Why are we here together now?”

“Why...? I thought it was because being near me is best for you, right? Since it means you’re more likely to encounter O again.”

“...Correct.”

I don’t think anything was wrong with my answer, but for some reason, Otonashi only frowns.

“Wait. So you fully understand your position in all this, and you haven’t gotten the wrong idea about what we’re doing?”

“...Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on! ...No, it’s okay. You’re not the type to say something like that unless you mean it. I have to answer sincerely, too. I just wanted to escape from that. Kazuki, I—”

“Hold on a sec.”

Otonashi’s voice grows rough after I cut her off. “Why did you stop me?!”

“I-I’m sorry... But what are we talking about here? I thought this was all about the Box.”

“The Box...? What’re you saying? Of course it’s important, but you must know I brought you back here to talk about our phone call yesterday.”

“What phone call yesterday?”

“Ah, yesterday, you—” Otonashi stops short, wide-eyed, for a moment, then swallows. “...I see. It’s like that message two days ago. No, but... I’ve spent too much time with you for that. There’s no way it could work over the phone...”

“Otonashi...?”

“Kazuki, I need to ask you something else.” Otonashi stops whispering and asks me loud and clear, “Did you...make a confession to me on the phone yesterday?”

A confession?

As in, “I love you—will you go out with me?”

“Yesterday, you told me over the phone that you were going to profess your love to me again in person tomorrow, and by that I mean today.”

“I-I’d never say that...”

“I know you wouldn’t. I realize that now upon reflection.”

“O-of course I wouldn’t! How could you even think I’d do something like that...?!”

“If you’re so certain, check your call history.”

I agree to Otonashi’s calm request and pull out my phone to look over my outgoing calls.

The name at the very top is *Maria Otonashi*.

The time stamp is May 1, 1:49 AM.

That's impossible. I should've been asleep then. I don't remember calling her.

"Yesterday, you... No, I guess technically it would've been today. At any rate, you called me right before two in the morning and told me you were in love with me. I know that for a fact."

There is no way I would ever pull something like that. At the same time, Otonashi wouldn't stage a show like this just to mess with my head.

Either way, I know I didn't do it. I'm absolutely sure of that.

"I don't know how they're doing it, but it has to be someone's idea of a prank, don't you think?"

"A prank, huh...? So you're proposing that someone co-opted your cell phone and professed his love to me as you just for a laugh?"

It does sound a little far-fetched, but I can't think of anything else. I'm about to say so when Otonashi continues.

"The voice was exactly the same as yours."

"What?"

Otonashi presses onward while I stand there gaping like an idiot.

"Unless you have some long-lost twin brother out there, I can say that with absolute confidence. It was unquestionably you."

"Y-you must have heard wrong. Maybe you just assumed you were hearing me since the call came from my number... That's got to be it..."

"Kazuki, I've spent almost an entire lifetime with you. It's ridiculous to think I wouldn't recognize your voice when I hear it."

Given the utter certainty on Otonashi's face, I know there's no way she could've been mistaken.

But if that's the case, the only possible conclusion is that I really did say those things to her, isn't it? No, there's no way. Otonashi is positive it was my voice on the phone, but I'm just as positive that I would never call and pour out my

heart to her like that. That doesn't change the fact that the call happened, though.

"None of this fits together..."

"You're right. The contradictions are simply too great for any normal explanation. The only possible answer is..."

Yes.

The incongruities are impossible. That's why...

"This has to be the work of a Box."

The word sits like a heavy weight on my chest. The fear welling up inside is almost unbearable, even though we still don't have the slightest idea of what we're facing.

"We have to devise a plan right away. The owner is clearly targeting us and seems to be hostile as well."

"What should I do...?"

"Good question... I need some time to assess the situation. For now, hang tight until I come up with something. I'll work out a game plan for how we should proceed."

I nod quietly.

"That's all for now. I'm going back to class," she says.

Otonashi turns away and leaves without even a glance back in my direction.

May 1 (Friday), 9:32 AM

I time my return to the classroom to coincide with our first-period break, only to find Kokone standing watch beside the doorway like some sort of guardian deity.

Our eyes meet, and for some reason, she's glaring at me. Her face is slightly flushed and red—maybe she's angry.

"...I waited for you..."

"Huh?"

“I was waiting for you to come talk to me!” Clearly upset, Kokone starts shouting. “But you were out there skipping first period with that other girl! What the hell?! I don’t get you at all! You don’t make any sense, Kazu!”

From my perspective, there is no discernible reason why she should be so worked up, but for the time being, I decide to keep my mouth shut.

That only makes things worse, though, as Kokone groans, “Nnngh!” and pushes me up against the wall of the hallway.

“Uh...I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?!”

“Huh? ...S-sorry.”

“I said, why are you apologizing?!”

Kokone gets even more up in my face as I stand there bewildered.

“Or maybe you have something you want to apologize for! Are you trying to erase what you did with an apology? Don’t you know how awful that is?! Well...actually, that would make things easier for me, but...”

“J-just hold on... What’s all this about?”

We’re really talking past each other here, exactly like the conversation I had with Otonashi.

...Wait. Hold on a second. Does that mean...?

“Why are you being so dumb?! You have to know! C’mon... You...”

Kokone’s face flushes an even-deeper red, until the tips of her ears are practically glowing.

If this is going where I think it is, I don’t want to hear any more. But nope, Kokone checks to make sure no one else is around, leans in, and whispers, “I’m talking about how you called me yesterday...*and said you liked me.*”

What the...? I said I liked Kokone?

At a complete loss for words, I fall into silence. Kokone looks up at me through her lashes.

“And it’s just that...I...”

Her gaze lowers uncomfortably. Maybe she read something into my reaction. Her mouth works silently as if she’s having trouble finding the right words, before she eventually continues.

“I’m sorry... I-it’s just that I don’t know what to think... I mean...I’ve always considered you a friend, and I thought you felt the same way about me. And... not that it really matters, but...there’s Daiya to think about, too.”

Mustering her courage, Kokone clenches her fists and focuses on me.

“...Wait for me. I’m not sure when I’ll have an answer for you, but wait a bit... I’m sorry.”

There is genuine pain on her face, and it threatens to break my heart. I want to cry out to her that it wasn’t me who said those things, but I know it would be pointless to explain. In fact, it would only make things worse.

Kokone misinterprets my agonized expression, and her mouth forms a grim line identical to mine. She spins on her heel and hurries back to the classroom.

Once she’s completely out of sight, I mutter under my breath, “I think of you as a friend, too.”

My hands ball into fists.

Suddenly, something occurs to me, and I pull out my phone and check my outgoing call history... Why didn’t I think of this before? There it is, at 1:29 in the morning on May 1.

Right under *Maria Otonashi* is the name *Kokone Kirino*.

May 1 (Friday), 11:00 AM

Now then, let’s see how things are turning out.

May 1 (Friday), 12:00 PM

The first thing I hear is a girl crying.

Daiya’s face is right in front of mine. We’re almost touching. I have no idea what’s going on.

What is this?

The emotion in Daiya's eyes is pure and hostile. But against who? The answer is obvious. It has to be me, since we're so close that I can see my own reflection in his corneas. It's me. I'm the object of his hatred.

Pain suddenly washes over my body as if I've suddenly remembered I have a sense of touch. My cheek and mouth hurt. Same with my wrists.

Daiya is sitting on top of me with a tight hold on my arms.

I'm finally beginning to grasp the situation.

We're in the music room. I should be in the classroom for third-period classic literature, but for some reason, I'm here, where we normally have fourth period. There's blood on my uniform. Whose is it? ...Probably mine, if that metallic taste is any indication. My mouth is all cut up. Most likely because Daiya hit me.

What happened...? What the hell is going on?!

"Daiya... Wha—?"

"Keep your mouth shut, Kazu. If you say anything else, I'll shut it for you."

The anger in Daiya's eyes is genuine. I know he meant every word he said. If I make even the slightest peep, he'll make good on that promise to lay into me.

This has to be some sort of bad dream.

But if this were only a nightmare, the pain wouldn't be so sharp and raw. This is reality, no two ways about it.

That girl is still crying... Who is it?

I turn my head to look and find Kokone Kirino sobbing.

The first feeling I embrace is acceptance. Oh. That's why she didn't stop Daiya, even after the situation escalated this far. The next feeling to enter my mind is puzzlement. Why is Kokone crying? Last is trepidation.

...It can't be.

I assess the situation as it stands now. Kokone is in tears, and Daiya is livid. Who made her cry? Who made him angry? I'm in the music room, so it's

probably fourth period. I remember nothing between third period and now, but I'm here all the same. I'm in a different place from where I last remember. In other words...

...I'm doing things unconsciously?

Like sending an e-mail to Otonashi without knowing it and confessing my love to her.

Or maybe like unwittingly telling Kokone I had feelings for her and trying to destroy my friendship with her.

Or like hurting Kokone without any awareness of it and sending Daiya into a rage?

"I think he's had enough, Daiyan."

Haruaki puts his hand on the other boy's shoulder as he speaks.

He's had enough?

Does that mean Daiya hit me once or twice while he was on top of me?

Daiya slams my arms into the floor and lets go, then stands up slowly without taking his baleful glare away from me for a second. Then, as if to hammer the point home—

"Ungh!"

—he stomps down on my stomach as hard as he can before turning away.

My body curls into a ball of pain. I can see the expressions of everyone around me. My classmates, the music teacher, even Haruaki—all of them are staring at me as if they don't know who I am. Kokone is sobbing even louder with her head against Daiya's chest.

I try to stand up, but the pain is too much, and I can't make it to my feet. No one steps in to lend a hand.

A thought enters my head as I lie there hunched over like I'm kowtowing in apology.

Why does it have to be me? What did I do to deserve this? I don't have any idea what happened, but I do know what caused it.

...The Box.

That's right—this is the Box's fault, not mine. I didn't do anything!

Why does this have to happen to me?!

I get to my feet on my own.

Everyone is standing around watching, but not a single person steps forward to help.

It makes sense. There's no reason to expect any of them to deduce that a Box caused this whole mess. That's why no one wants to touch me. Or approach me. Or speak to me. No one. Not Daiya, not Kokone, and not even Haruaki. No one. No one. No one no one no one...

"Are you all right, Kazuki?"

Except for her.

I smile. Everyone freezes at her sudden appearance, perhaps because we're still in the middle of class. I don't find it strange at all, though.

"...Maria," I call almost reflexively.

As Otonashi stands in front of the music room door, her eyes go wide at hearing her name. However, her composure quickly returns, and she rushes over.

Otonashi doesn't care that no one else wanted to help. She comes up so close that I can see the shadows of her eyelashes as she reaches out to gently touch my swollen cheek.

"We need to get these wounds cleaned up. Let's go to the nurse's office."

"...Okay."

She walks off, and I follow silently.

Not a soul says a word to me as I leave.

As I turn my back on the classroom, Kokone's crying gets louder. Or at least that's how it feels.

There's no one in the nurse's office, not even the nurse.

Once she's sure of that, Otonashi examines my injuries with light touches here and there. Opening up the cabinet and grabbing the first aid kit, she begins treating them with an apparently practiced hand.

"I came to talk to you because I had an idea about the Box, but I never expected to find you in such a miserable state... What exactly happened?" Otonashi asks as she disinfects my scrapes and cuts.

"I wish I knew myself."

"You're saying you don't remember?"

I nod. Otonashi lets out a sigh of exasperation.

"You know, that's all that's come out of you ever since the Rejecting Classroom. Even I'm starting to get sick of it."

"...It's not like I can help it."

"I was joking."

Otonashi reaches out and puts a bandage on my face as she says this.

"All I saw was Oomine stomping on you. You have no recollection of what happened before that?"

"...Daiya was already on top of me when I came to."

"And you haven't the faintest clue as to why he hit you?"

"Yeah. I don't know anything."

Otonashi folds her arms in thought at my reply. "Do you have your phone on you, Kazuki?"

"My phone? It should be in my pocket..."

"It could have some record of what happened. See if you can find anything at all."

I quickly press the button.

Incoming and outgoing calls, e-mail in-box and out-box—there's no change from before, as far I can tell. I open up my data folder.

“Voice memos.”

Was that always there? I open this folder, too.

Inside is one file, named with a twelve-digit number. It must be the time and date the file was made. Unless the file name was altered, it appears this was recorded around two AM on May 1—in other words, in the middle of last night.

I open the file and put the phone to my ear.

The recording plays.

“Good morning, Kazuki Hoshino. No, good afternoon, or maybe it’s good evening?”

What the hell is this?

I pause the playback for a moment. Why is there a voice memo from some rando on my phone? Why is he talking to me?

“What’s wrong, Kazuki? Did you find something?”

I ignore Otonashi’s query and press play again with a trembling finger.

“Ah well, it doesn’t matter. I’m sure you don’t care, either. No, what’s foremost on your mind right now is the question of who I am, correct? Oh yeah, you know about Boxes, don’t you? At least that’s what O told me. I can skip explaining all the details there, right?”

He knows about Boxes and O. Does that mean he’s an owner?

“I’m sure you’ve noticed by now that your life is collapsing around your ears. Yeah, it’s wonderful. I’m doing it on purpose, after all. Why, you ask? So I can destroy you.”

The disparity between the voice’s cheerful, pleasant tone and what it’s saying makes my heart race.

“I’m going to leave you in ruins. I’m going to violate everything you hold dear. Now that I have a Box, all that you once had will be stripped away from you. After all, I...”

The recording cuts off. Wait, no. I just dropped my phone.

“Kazuki...! Are you okay? What were you listening to?”

“Ah...”

The malice in that recording is as clear as the light of day. There’s no denying it now. Someone with a Box, that most powerful and terrible of weapons, has it in for me and is trying to ruin my life.

Otonashi picks up my phone and opens the recording.

“This is...!”

A scowl appears on her face as she listens. After a moment, she closes the phone and wordlessly returns it to me before crossing her arms in contemplation.

“Kazuki.” She breaks her silence after a moment and says my name in a distressingly stark tone. “I’ve been deliberating about what happened this morning, and I came up with a rough plan for how we should proceed. I wasn’t able to reach any concrete conclusions, unfortunately. Upon hearing this, I am now certain of one thing, though.”

Otonashi gives me a sharp look as she delivers her verdict.

“I don’t trust anything you say or do.”

“...Huh?”

I fail to grasp her meaning, and my mouth hangs open foolishly.

“Even you must understand by now. The power of this new Box is affecting you directly. It’s quite likely that you’ve already fallen into the owner’s clutches. There’s no way I can trust you while you’re under their influence.”

I mull over her words.

She can’t trust me...?

“Wh-why? It’s not like I’ve done anything to betray you!”

“That’s true, *as long as you’re actually Kazuki Hoshino.*”

“What?”

“Are you really Kazuki Hoshino, or are you the owner?”

“Wh-what the hell are you talking about, Otonashi? The owner is the one who

made that recording!”

“...Didn’t you listen to the entire thing? Even if you didn’t, surely you recognize the voice...”

“Otonashi, do you know who recorded that message? Did you already figure out who the owner is? Is it someone you know?”

“...I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised it’s taking him a while to understand. It’s possible he’s never heard that voice in the flesh, not to mention that the tone is considerably different than usual.”

Otonashi isn’t answering my question, just speaking quietly to herself. She turns away to leave the nurse’s office.

“W-wait! At least tell me whose voice it is!”

She stops but doesn’t turn around.

“Kazuki, pull yourself together and try listening to that recording again.”

And with that, she walks off.

I have nothing to say in the face of such a blatant dismissal.

I open the voice memo again, and understanding suddenly dawns on me as I recognize *the voice that is always in my ears, yet I have never actually “heard” before.*

“Ha-ha-ha...”

All I can do is laugh. What else? I wouldn’t trust me, either, after I heard this.

“...Dammit.”

Well, what the hell am I supposed to do now...?

“It’s the easiest thing in the world. After all—”

I finally heard the rest of the recording that I missed when I dropped my phone.

“—I share the same body with you, Kazuki Hoshino.”

The voice in the recording is mine.

May 1 (Friday), 1:00 PM

Think I'll lie low for now.

May 1 (Friday), 2:00 PM

I lose consciousness.

Then it comes back.

I'm sitting down. It should still be lunchtime, *but for some reason I'm already here*. I check the time. It's two on the dot, so it's about time for fifth period to end. I quickly survey my surroundings. Kokone's and Daiya's desks are empty. My guess is they probably went home early. Everyone else is focused on class for the most part. Nothing seems out of the ordinary at this point. On the desk are my textbook, notebook, and writing supplies. It doesn't look like I've actually taken any notes, though.

There's no doubting it now.

Someone else is inside my body with me. There's "me" and an imperceptible "other me."

And the other me was in control of my body until only a few minutes ago.

The bell rings.

Even though it's break time, everyone's keeping their distance from me because of the scene in the music room. I'm sure the other me intentionally brought this about. He did say he was going to destroy me, after all. This has to be one of his attacks.

I slump over my desk.

How am I supposed to fight this other me, especially now that even Otonashi has abandoned me?

"Hosshi."

I lift my head at the sound of my name. Haruaki's expression has none of its usual playfulness. The serious tone of voice doesn't suit him at all. "Hey, why the hell would you do something like that to Kokone?"

I stay quiet. I have no answer for him, mostly because I don't even know what

I did.

“This is just me, but I don’t think you would do something like that for no reason. I can’t for the life of me figure out what it would be, but I’m sure you must have one. Come on—fill me in here. Don’t leave me in the dark.”

Haruaki sounds like he’s in pain.

“If you can’t help me understand, then I don’t know if I can have your back in this.”

Something dawns on me as he confesses.

Haruaki is the last bastion of normalcy in my life.

Would he believe me if I told him someone else is taking control of my body? ...This is Haruaki we’re talking about, so he just might. Still...

“...I can’t tell you. At least not right now.”

My understanding of this situation is a scrambled mess, so I don’t have any confidence in my ability to explain things in a believable way.

“But don’t worry, I’ll tell you soon.”

I make sure I look Haruaki in the eye to show I’m sincere, at least.

“Got it. I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

That’s all he says, biting back all the other things I’m sure he wants to ask. He walks away quietly.

He’ll be waiting, he said. Now I’m obligated to explain to him once the time arrives. If I’m not careful about it, I could lose him.

And without Haruaki, the one thing that hasn’t changed, I probably have no hope of maintaining my life as I know it.

...That settles it. I know what I have to do now. I have to unravel the mystery of the Box and this other me.

Question is, how do I go about it? I have no way of interacting with this imposter in my body.

“.....Oh.”

Right. How did I find out about him in the first place? He contacted me.

I step out into the hallway and pull out my phone. I'm going to record a message for my counterpart.

There's no guarantee he'll reply, of course, but it's worth trying regardless.

"Nice to meet you, I guess? I'm talking to you, other me."

I start the recording.

"I understand that you share my body with me. But there are a few things I still don't get. I want you to tell me more about this Box of yours. I also want to know who, or what, you are."

I wonder if he'll respond to such straightforward questions. He is trying to completely ruin my life, after all.

That's why I decide to issue him a challenge.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to. No matter how you answer, it won't change my actions. I don't care if you have some lofty purpose or if there's a reason I should sympathize with you or even if you just hate me."

I'm surprised at how naturally the anger wells up within me. This isn't like me at all. Still, I feel like it has to be said.

"I cannot allow you to exist."

He has to know I'm determined.

Who would sit back and let this happen? It's unthinkable. He's trying to take away everything I am.

My legs are shaking so hard that I have to steady myself against the wall. My body isn't ready for the fact that, for perhaps the first time in my life, someone out there is trying to do me serious harm.

I close my phone and let out a long breath.

I will crush this "other me."

No matter what happens, I cannot allow him to exist.

I notice Kazuki Hoshino has recorded a voice memo.

May 1 (Friday), 4:00 PM

In front of me is the face of an unfamiliar high school girl. I'm so startled that I let go of the strap in my hand and fall over. Ignoring the snickers from those around me, I stand up and try to get my bearings.

The strap means I'm on a train.

I don't even need to think about it at this point. The other me was in control of my body again. I pull out my phone to check, and sure enough, there's a new voice memo waiting for me.

I press the play button.

"I see... So this is a good way for us to keep in touch. I was starting to worry I'd get bored as the only one reaching out, so to return the favor, I'll answer your questions."

It's my own voice coming from the speaker.

"I received a Box, and my wish was granted. That's how I became you, Kazuki Hoshino."

I swallow nervously.

"I've taken possession of your body now, but I only have control here and there, which makes me think 'possession' is perhaps too strong of a word. So relax. This is just a temporary thing. These little body-jackings will end within one week of when I used the Box. The instant it becomes the sixth, the final day of Golden Week, your soul will be erased from this body. Only I will remain."

Which means I have only four days and change to find and destroy the Box.

"I hope that clarifies things for you. Now then, you also asked who I am. Heh-heh-heh, that's a difficult one. Who am I, really? To tell you the truth, I don't really know, myself. I mean, at the moment, I'm Kazuki Hoshino, aren't I? I don't think that's the answer you're looking for, though, is it? So I decided to make things a little easier for you to parse and came up with a temporary name for myself. You can call me..."

Using my voice, he says his name.

"...‘Yuhei Ishihara.’"

I’ve never heard it before. I commit the unfamiliar name to memory, and I won’t be forgetting it anytime soon.

"Now, let me give you my take on things. You won’t allow me to exist, will you? Don’t take this the wrong way, but I got a good laugh from that one. Don’t you see? There’s no way you and I will ever meet face-to-face. All we can do is record messages for each other on the phone like this. How do you think you’re going to get rid of me?"

"Yuhei Ishihara" giggles creepily in my voice.

"But I do feel some pity for you, so I’ll go ahead and tell you the one and only way you can be rid of me. I already control more than half of Kazuki Hoshino, so it’s really quite simple..."

He continues.

"...Just kill yourself."

His unbearable laughter rings out again. The memo plays on, though it’s all I can do to refrain from pressing the stop button.

Having had his fill of laughter, "Yuhei Ishihara" brings his message to a close.

"Oh yeah. I got a text from one of your friends. You may not have noticed yet, so I thought I’d let you know."

A friend...?

Swallowing hard, I open my in-box. At the very top is the name *Haruaki Usui*. The message has already been read, though I have no recollection of opening it.

What did he...

What did this bastard do to Haruaki...?!

I take a deep breath and let it out, but I still can’t seem to calm myself and end up chewing my lip nervously. I hate to admit it, but my hands are shaking.

I open the message.

"Don’t talk to me for a while."

Oh no...

And that's how I lost my last refuge, the one thing keeping my life sane.

May 1 (Friday), 11:22 PM

I'm dreaming.

I've had this dream many times before.





May 2 (Saturday)

May 2 (Saturday), 12:11 AM

My eyes open to the sound of something vibrating on my desk.

I climb out of bed, pick up the phone responsible for the racket, and take a look at the LCD screen.

Maria Otonashi.

Maria Otonashi? Why's she calling me? If she's reaching out despite the present circumstances, maybe "Kazuki Hoshino" really hasn't told her about what's happening to him yet... Nah, I'm sure even someone like him would have trouble bringing up something as outlandish as a Box to his girlfriend. Still, I wouldn't be too surprised if she noticed something was off without him telling her... Whatever.

I leave those thoughts alone for the moment and answer the phone. There's no fighting my desire to speak to the one I admire so much.

"Hello?"

"Kazuki. Come over right away."

Wow! Is this how she always talks to him? Now what do I do?

I take a moment to consider my situation.

The Box will allow me to assume complete control of Kazuki Hoshino's body in one week. If all I wanted to do was take over him, the best thing to do would be

to sit back and wait. Of course, it's also better if I have as little contact with Maria Otonashi as possible.

That isn't my true purpose, though. I can't let myself get the wrong idea.

Right now, I know what I want to do. *Make Kazuki Hoshino suffer enough to want to rip off his own head—subjugate him so thoroughly that he offers up his body to me on bended knee and begs me to accept it. And then, when May 5, the final day, arrives, I want him so mutilated, so stripped of everything that made him who was, that he is nothing more than an empty shell that exists only to surrender control to me.*

And why is that what I'm after? Because then I'll be able to feel like I really am Kazuki Hoshino.

If the takeover doesn't feel real, I'll never be anything more than some parasitic presence inhabiting his body, which would render all of this meaningless.

Perhaps that's the reason we're sharing this body for the time being—if I don't do what I have to, I'll never truly become him. I swear, this Box really is something.

"Hey, why aren't you saying anything?"

Oh yeah. Well, my path forward from here is clear. Maria Otonashi is unquestionably an important person in his life. Losing her would harm him irreparably.

That's why "Yuhei Ishihara" is going to take her away. It's an absolute must if my all-important desire is to be satisfied.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking a little." I recall how "Kazuki Hoshino" speaks before I continue. "Um, so, your place. Okay, if you come and get me."

Judging by what she said earlier, he must visit her home on a fairly regular basis.

"What're you asking me that for? Surely you can ride your bike this far?"

"My bike isn't in very good shape right now."

I fire off some plausible excuse. The truth is that I don't know where she lives.

If I can't convince her to come pick me up, then I'm in trouble.

"Seriously, what type of man asks a woman to come pick him up? It should be the other way around... Fine. I'll be coming on my motorbike. I trust you're okay with that?"

"Motorbike? ...You mean like a moped?"

"No...it's a 250cc."

Dammit. There's no reason Kazuki Hoshino wouldn't know that Maria Otonashi rides an actual motorcycle.

"Oh, right. I didn't tell you—I bought a motorcycle recently."

"Ah, yeah, you must not have."

That was too close... Actually, a little slipup like that wouldn't be enough to blow my cover, so maybe I'm being a bit too cautious. Still, this is Maria Otonashi I'm dealing with here, so I can't help but be on edge.

"Besides, I'm not old enough for a license yet."

She doesn't have a driver's license? Maybe not pretending to know was the right choice after all.

"Anyway, I'll come by your place in fifteen minutes. Wait for me outside."

She hangs up before I have a chance to respond.

"...Who was that, Kazu? I thought I heard a girl's voice. Why didn't you go out on the veranda?" asks a girl in underwear—probably Kazuki Hoshino's older sister. I see—he must not make phone calls in this room when she's home. I'll file that away for future reference.

"Probably not that Kasumi Mogi of yours, at this time of night..."

Kasumi Mogi? Who the hell is that?

May 2 (Saturday), 12:31 AM

Exactly fifteen minutes later, Maria Otonashi arrives on a simple, no-frills motorcycle.

"Here."

She tosses a helmet my way. It lands in my arms, but I'm unsure of what to do next. She's quietly observing me, though, so I decide it's best to slip it on right away.

"Are you wearing a helmet just to stand there? Get on."

I climb aboard behind her as ordered and hesitantly wrap my arms around her waist. Maria Otonashi doesn't say anything. Her torso is very slender. It belongs to her, the one I admire so.

In less than ten minutes, she stops the bike in front of a five-story apartment building.

Although it pains me a bit to let go, I slide off the motorcycle and remove my helmet so I can survey her home. It has a brick exterior, probably on the expensive side. It also locks automatically. The rent can't be cheap.

I find it hard to believe she would bring her boyfriend over to her parents' place, especially this late at night. She must live on her own. And she's bringing him up to her room. Which means...I know what we're doing. No two ways about it.

My heart is pounding as loud as thunder. Without any concern for my nervousness, Maria Otonashi leads me into the elevator and straight down the hall, where she unlocks the door to room 403.

The first thing I notice as I enter is the smell of peppermint. It's a studio room of about 150–200 square feet, about ten tatami mats in size, but it seems much larger because it's practically empty.

"Why are you looking around like you've never seen any of this before? Nothing's changed since you were last here."

"...Oh, really?" I collect myself and take a seat on one of the floor cushions. Maria Otonashi watches me out of the corner of her eye, then goes and digs around in one of the closets for something.

"All right, Kazuki, stick out your hands."

Stick out my hands? Is she going to kiss them?

"What're you waiting for? Like this."

Maria Otonashi demonstrates by putting both arms out in front of her. I follow suit as she asks.

Click.

What's that sound? I wonder, just as I sense pressure around my right wrist. I look down at it.

Handcuffs.

"Is this some sort of joke, Otonashi?"

"Joke? I might ask the same thing of you. This is what we always do here, remember?"

"What we always do"? She puts him in handcuffs?

"What? Are you in the mood to put up a bit of a fight today? What am I ever going to do with you...?"

"O-ow!"

With an impish smile, Maria Otonashi twists my arm behind my back with practiced ease, snapping the other cuff shut on my left wrist. She attaches another set of restraints on my feet, leaving me on the floor. I try moving a bit. I could probably stand if I tried, but that's about it.

"We'll be using this today, too."

Maria Otonashi pulls out a black cloth and ties it around my eyes. Now I can't see anything, either.

I'm in a fine state. I'm bound hand and foot, blindfolded, and stuck wriggling around on the floor like some sort of grub. Like I've been captured by the enemy.

...Huh? Wait, that's exactly what's happening, isn't it?

"That should do it. Shall we get started?"

Maria Otonashi must have noticed something wrong with Kazuki Hoshino. There's no reason for her to do whatever she usually does with her boyfriend at this point.

If that's the case, *then who exactly is Maria Otonashi interacting with right*

now?

“So...”

She continues on.

“...I know you aren’t Kazuki Hoshino, so who are you?”

I get it. All of this was a big charade to get this personality tied up here like this.

“Heh-heh...”

Amazing. I wouldn’t expect any less of Maria Otonashi. That’s why I look up to her so much. It thrills me to know that this won’t ruin my image of her.

“Why are you laughing? You don’t seem to understand your present situation.”

Let’s try to hold out for as long as we can.

“C’mon... Otonashi, that’s ridiculous. What are you saying?”

“Drop the pointless act.”

Welp, apparently, it is indeed pointless. That’s why I can’t stop laughing.

“You’re a strange one. I just deceived you completely and tied you up, but you couldn’t seem happier.”

“Can I ask you something? Why don’t you think I’m Kazuki Hoshino?” I ask, putting an end to the facade.

“I know about the Box, and I listened to your recording.”

Her frank response clarifies a lot of things. I now understand not just how she saw through me, but also why she’s so special.

“Even if you knew about the Box, and even if you listened to that message, you still shouldn’t have had any way of distinguishing between ‘me’ and ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ When did you figure out how to tell us apart?”

“I knew the moment you answered your phone with ‘hello.’”

“...You’ve got to be kidding.”

There’s no way she could distinguish between two people with the same

voice over the phone.

“Kazuki always answers with ‘yes.’ He never says ‘hello.’ Of course, I might have let such a small thing pass under different circumstances. But since I know he is currently trapped in the effects of a Box, I’m naturally going to be suspicious of him. After that, it’s only a matter of verification. If you get sloppy in your planning, there will always be a trail to follow. I’ll throw you a bone here: Kazuki has never been to this apartment.”

“Well, I’m definitely thankful to know that.”

It makes me sick to think someone as dull as Kazuki Hoshino would regularly visit the home of such a noble woman as Maria Otonashi.

“So you pulled the wool over my eyes, and now you’re checking to make sure that ‘I’ really exist.”

“There’s no need to verify any of that at this point. What I really want to know is *if you and Kazuki share the same memories*. But it seems I’ve got my answer. You don’t know what he knows.”

“.....”

So she’s already moved on to the next level of investigation.

It’s certainly an important question. If “Yuhei Ishihara” shares memories with “Kazuki Hoshino,” even someone as clever as she would never be able to prevent information leaks no matter how carefully she and “Kazuki Hoshino” laid their plans. They could never combine their efforts fully.

“So let me ask again: Who are you?”

“Can’t you tell just by looking at me? I’m Kazuki Hoshino!”

“Quit screwing around and answer the question.”

I shrug from my position on the floor.

“I’m not screwing around. I am Kazuki Hoshino. *I’m destined to become him thanks to the Box’s power.*”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said. My wish is to become Kazuki Hoshino. The Boxes

grant wishes, right? That's why I am him. There's no other way to put it."

Maria Otonashi falls silent after I finish speaking.

"...You wanted to become Kazuki Hoshino? That's insane... Why Kazuki of all people? I don't see anything particularly impressive about him physically."

"It's because you're always near him," I answer immediately.

"...Because of me?"

"Yeah. I really admired you. Being next to my beloved Maria Otonashi—that alone was worth taking over his body."

I hear her let out a weary sigh.

"...I never thought I would help inspire someone to steal Kazuki's body." After that momentary lamentation, Maria Otonashi quickly recovers and presses onward. "Now that I know you're trying to pass yourself off as Kazuki Hoshino, I can't very well keep calling you by his name."

"Fine. Call me 'Yuhei Ishihara,' then."

"'Yuhei Ishihara'? Hmm, I've never heard it before. Don't tell me that's your real name?"

"Maybe."

"Hmph, fine. I am going to need you to tell me how you switch places with Kazuki, though."

"And what would be the point of knowing that?"

"I don't have to answer your questions."

"Well then, I don't have to answer yours."

"You sure do have a lot of nerve for someone who's practically hogtied."

"Don't try to fool me. I know you can't do anything. Inflicting violence on me would mean inflicting violence on the body of Kazuki Hoshino."

"There are plenty of interrogation methods that don't have an effect on the body, but, well...it's not like violence was ever an option for me, anyway..." she says in a soft voice.

“Did you say something?”

“It’s nothing... More importantly, I take it you aren’t going to tell me what I want to know?”

“Nope. To be honest, it doesn’t matter to me either way, but I’m still not gonna.”

“It doesn’t matter?”

“Well, you see, as long as nothing happens to the Box, ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ will vanish from this body the instant it becomes May 6, no matter what you do. So how do you think knowing more would change anything? There’s no way I’d ever tell you how to get at the Box, so what’re you going to do? Kill me? That’d mean the death of Kazuki Hoshino, too!”

I give a deliberately wicked-sounding laugh.

So how about it, Maria Otonashi? It’s a no-win situation—you probably weren’t expecting this level of despair, were you?

“Heh-heh...”

What? For some reason, she’s giggling.

“...What’s so funny? Is laughing your only option in the face of such a hopeless dilemma?”

“You call this hopeless? All of this is about as threatening as a mosquito compared with the rejecting I had to deal with in the past. Heh-heh... The only threat facing me is the fact that, for the time being, you seem to have no intention of telling me how you take control of Kazuki’s body. Do you really think that’s a hopeless situation?”

“What part of ‘the only way to resolve this situation is to kill Kazuki Hoshino’ did you not understand?”

“That’s actually the reason why I laughed. I mean, *that’s a lie, right?*”

I fall silent.

“I appreciate that you’re trying to entrap me, but I’m afraid I’m not going to let myself be taken in by such an obvious attempt at deception.”

“...What makes you think I’m lying?”

“You said it yourself. You said that you are Kazuki Hoshino. He doesn’t have a Box. So that means you shouldn’t be the owner.”

“Are we playing word games now or something? None of that will help you escape the reality of this, you know.”

“Still don’t get it, do you? Well, let’s see if you can answer this.”

Maria Otonashi speaks in a firm voice.

“Do you truly believe it’s possible for your mind to inhabit another person’s body?”

“Tha...” That’s...

“Can’t answer, huh?”

Agh... I screwed up. I’m not sure exactly how, but I can tell that my failure to answer was a major misstep.

“Boxes have the capacity to make any wish come true. But anyone who is even somewhat sane would harbor some doubts deep in their mind as to whether such a wish could ever truly be granted. The fact that you couldn’t answer with conviction straightaway proves you don’t fully believe such a wish is possible, either. The Box incorporated this doubt into the wish when it was granted. *That’s why the owner is unable to take control of Kazuki Hoshino.*”

“.....”

“In other words, the owner isn’t stealing Kazuki’s body—they’re still out there somewhere living normally... *Unlike you.*” She fires off another question, ignoring my sullen silence. “If you’re not the owner, then who are you?”

I have no answer.

“If you don’t know, then I’ll answer for you. You’re a false existence conjured up by the distorted nature of the wish. An imitation of the owner, nothing more than a fake. That’s right—you’re a fabrication.” With a small smirk on her face, she continues, “And as such, you are not the owner I’m looking for.”

Huh, she’s right. I guess that’s why...I never had the Box.

“Ah-ha-ha.”

But what does that even matter?

The whole reason I used the Box to make a wish was to be rid of my miserable life. I’m not the owner? I’m a fabrication? So much the better! If I was never a real person to begin with, there’s no question in my mind that I can become Kazuki Hoshino.

“...What’s that laughter for, ‘Yuhei Ishihara’?”

“Heh-heh, does it really matter? More importantly, I have a question for you now. I’ll accept that I’m an invention. So who are you? How is it you’re able to understand all of this?”

“Who am I, you say...?” For some reason, Maria Otonashi seems to be struggling to find the words. “...You are a falsehood. And I...”

“What’s there to think so hard about? All I’m asking is why you know so much about the Boxes.”

“...I see. That’s what you want to know, is it?” Her customary strength creeps back into her voice with this understanding. “I am actually a Box myself. As one of them, I am obviously familiar with their nature.”

“...A Box? Is that supposed to be a figure of speech?”

“If you want to view it that way.”

So she’s a Box. If that’s really true, this couldn’t be any more *perfect*. “Hey, I have something I need to tell you, don’t I?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Huh? I’m positive I told you last night that I would tell you something today. Well, it’s finally the new day, so I’m going to say it.”

I smile as wide as I can, though I’m sorry she’ll be able to see only part of it because of the blindfold.

“I love you, Maria Otonashi.”

She described herself as a Box.

That couldn’t be more on the money. It makes her even more ideal, both as a

prize to be won and as an adversary.

May 2 (Saturday), 7:06 AM

I was sleeping in an unfamiliar room with handcuffs on my wrists.

“.....What the...?”

My head is still foggy and working slowly from having just woken up. The room is white and smells nice. I can hear someone in the shower. My back hurts. There’s a blanket on me, but I’m in cuffs.

Wait.

What the hell?

In a flash, the grogginess is gone. My panicked attempt to jump to my feet ends in me falling flat on my face. As I apply pressure to my injured nose with both hands, I work myself back to a sitting position and take another look around. There’s a semidouble bed and a table with a laptop, speakers, and a bunch of difficult-looking books, but other than that, the room is essentially bare. When I notice the blouse of a sailor uniform hanging on the edge of the closet door, I realize I must be in a girl’s room.

Is this the work of “Yuhei Ishihara”? Yeah, it has to be.

The sound of the shower stops. After a moment, I hear a hair dryer. Whoever is in there must be the tenant of this apartment. In other words, a girl...

That means on the other side of that wall, there’s a naked girl...? What’s going on...? What did I— What did “Yuhei Ishihara” do to her?!

The sound of the dryer stops, and the door to the bathroom opens.

“Wh-whoa!!” I quickly look away from the figure, who’s wearing only a dress shirt.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

My mind blanks out for a second as I recognize a very familiar voice. “Huh?” My head snaps up before I can stop myself, and I see a face I know very well. “Uh, Otonashi...?”

“Who else do I look like?”

Her words prompt me to take in all of her. Yep, this is Maria Otonashi and no one else. Flustered, I avert my gaze once I realize I've been staring very intently at her while she has only a shirt and underwear on.

"H-hey, you should be more careful if you know I'm around!"

"What're you getting so worked up about? Just a little peek isn't going to do any harm, is it?"

...That doesn't sound like the type of thing a girl would say. In fact, it sounds more like one of Haruaki's lines when he's harassing Kokone. I'm about to say so, but the next thing that comes out of Otonashi's mouth puts her previous remark to shame.

"Yesterday, you saw way more than my underwear, after all. It's a little late to get your boxers in a twist over this, don't you think?"

".....What?"

"You may look all calm and innocent, but you went for it as soon as we got inside. I never would have suspected."

"Wh-what're you talking about?"

Everything about the present circumstances agrees with what Otonashi is hinting at, though. This is her room, she was taking a shower, and now she's here dressed like she has nothing to hide...

"Y-you're joking, right?" I ask apprehensively.

"Yes, I am," Otonashi replies, quick and easy.

"Huh?"

"...Hmph, I see. You really are 'Kazuki Hoshino.' No one else could mimic the way your mouth hangs open like an idiot's."

As I'd hoped, none of it was true, but an unbearable emotion I can't quite put my finger on wells up within me.

"...Hey, um, Otonashi? Since I don't know how I got here, I'm guessing that means you spoke with 'Yuhei Ishihara'...?" As I speak, she approaches my awkward position on the floor until she's practically on top of me. She's so close

I can catch a whiff of some pleasant aroma, maybe shampoo or conditioner or something. “Wh-what’re you doing?”

I hear a couple of clicks and realize that Otonashi is removing my leg restraints.

...Not that I’m not glad about that, but I wish she would have said something first. Once the cuffs are off, Otonashi sits back.

“Okay...”

I follow suit and sit up straight as well.

A few moments pass, and then she says, “Who am I, Kazuki?”

What’s she asking this for all of a sudden?

She’s Maria Otonashi. I know that in a heartbeat. I can’t help but wonder why she’s asking, given our current circumstances.

“Remember our time in the Rejecting Classroom.”

“Huh? ...Oh!”

Her hint reminds me of the time she asked us all to write her name, much like she’s doing now.

Back then, Otonashi had been trying to see if any of us would write *Maria*, a name only someone who had managed to retain their memories would know. So why’s she doing something similar now?

It must be so she can tell us apart. She’s asking to see if I’m really “me” or “Yuhei Ishihara.” If I use the name only the real me would know, she can be sure she’s dealing with me and not the imposter.

“...Aya Otonashi.” With an edge to my voice, I reply with the name she once used in the Rejecting Classroom that the false “me” could not possibly know.

Still, is she asking me because she can’t yet distinguish between me and “Yuhei Ishihara”? Does she really need to go this far to tell us apart?

It’s really...disheartening somehow.

“So you call me Aya?” Otonashi asks softly, in a tone that implies she’s less than pleased herself.

“...Was that the wrong answer?”

“No, it’s correct. I just didn’t expect you to reach a clear response that quickly, that’s all.”

“.....Anyway, does this mean you’re sure it’s really me now?”

“For the time being. I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, but I’ve been keeping tabs on essentially everything. I’ve already listened to the voice memo he left.”

“Yeah.”

“I even talked to him.”

“...What was he like? Were you able to get anything out of him?”

“Well, I can’t really say.” I detect a hint of coldness in her reply.

“He must’ve been violent, right? That’s why you had to tie him up?”

“That possibility was part of the reason I had these ready, yes, but I think it’s more appropriate to say I got the cuffs for you.”

“...What?”

“What ran through your mind when you woke up and found yourself restrained? What did you actually do?”

“I freaked out... And I fell on my face for no good reason.”

“I wanted to provoke that kind of reaction in you.”

“...You wanted to mess with me?”

“No. I thought if I could see you panic, I might learn to recognize the moment you switch from ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ to ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ Unfortunately, I missed it while I was in the shower. It would have been fascinating, and I’m truly sorry I wasn’t able to see it.”

If that’s not messing with me, I don’t know what is.

“Anyway, that’s enough for now. It’s time to get moving, Kazuki.”

“...Huh?”

Otonashi looks exasperated for some reason. “You need to get home. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Uh...” I glance around and spot a clock on the wall. It’s seven fifteen in the morning.

“Do you plan on being late? It’s time to head to school.”

“Ugh...”

Our school has every second and fourth Saturday off, but otherwise, we have classes up until fourth period.

“What’s that ‘ugh’ about? Does going to school empty-handed sound like a good idea to you?”

She’s right. I have to stop by my house first. “...Um, is it okay if I go home by myself?”

“Are you serious? You don’t even know your way from here. Do you honestly expect to make it on your own? Besides, if you’re on foot, you’ll never make it in time for class. I’ll give you a ride on my bike.”

“...O-okay.”

What do I do...?

It’s not like I intended to, but I stayed out all night without even telling anyone, let alone asking for permission. And now I’m coming home in the morning. I check my phone and see that, as expected, I’ve missed several calls from my mom. That in itself is bad enough, but if I show up with a girl my age...

“Um, hey, Otonashi. I need you to stay out of sight when we get to my place...”

“Why?”

Otonashi looks puzzled. I guess she didn’t catch my meaning.

At this rate, my only option is to sneak home and get ready without Mom noticing.

May 2 (Saturday), 7:34 AM

My attempt to get home without being noticed could not have failed any harder.

“I screwed up,” Otonashi whispers to me after we park her bike in front of my

house and start walking toward the station.

“.....You really did.”

I agree with a sigh.

My mom spotted us just as we were about to go up the stairs.

Naturally, she started chewing me out straightaway.

It was unavoidable, really. I understand it's her job as a mother to be angry when her son stays out all night without permission. She had to do it, but...

I also knew Otonashi would get impatient the longer she had to wait out front.

When Otonashi finally appeared, as expected, my mom fixed her with a baleful glare as the one responsible for my late arrival at home.

Otonashi answered the evil eye with a surprisingly weak smile before explaining, “Kazuki wasn't out partying all night, just so you know. He was with me in my apartment the entire time. We didn't call anyone else over. It was just the two of us. Nothing to worry about.”

...That's, um, even worse.

My mom still hadn't quite learned to let go of us kids, and Otonashi's words left her so obviously petrified that I had to feel sorry for her.

Oblivious to the reason for my mother's reaction, Otonashi frowned and went on. “...What's the matter? I told you Kazuki slept at my place and didn't stay out anywhere else. What's wrong with that? Sure, I got a little rough with him, but still.”

Mom's eyes slowly moved down to my wrists, which were red from the handcuffs.

She crumpled to the ground.

It was only after Otonashi rushed over to catch her that she finally understood.

“Oh. We're the same age and different genders, aren't we?”

“How am I ever supposed to face my mom now...?”

I let out a long sigh at the memory.

“What’re you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? You just said you screwed up.”

“I did, but I was talking about my motorcycle.”

“Your motorcycle?” It dawns on me that our concerns are not on the same page.

“I let you ride my bike, right? Twice, if I include ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’ That’s what I was calling a screwup.”

“...Huh? Why?”

“Imagine if ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ takes over your body while you’re on my bike. He might get scared and let go of me, just like how you got spooked and fell over because you were cuffed.”

“Oh.” That’s why Otonashi left her bike at my place.

“That was sloppy for me... I need to be more careful from here on out.”

“Yeah... By the way, Otonashi, don’t you think it’s about time you fill me in on what happened with ‘Yuhei Ishihara’?”

I know something is up the instant the question left my mouth.

“.....”

Otonashi stops in her tracks and looks over at me.

Expressionlessly.

“Uh...?” Why is she looking at me like that?

She answers, her face still devoid of emotion, *“I can’t tell you.”*

“Wh-why—?”

“Why? I thought I already explained.” She dismisses me indifferently. “I can’t trust anything you say or do anymore.”

She did say that. I remember hearing it. There’s no way I could forget. But still...

“Doesn’t that statement not apply anymore...?”

I mean, back then we had only the vaguest clue of what was going on, but it’s different now. Otonashi knows the reason for my mysterious behavior.

“I wouldn’t assume that if I were you. Guess you still don’t get it, do you? I have no way of telling how much of what ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ said to me is true. He could actually have all your memories and be using both personalities to fool me.”

“N-no way.”

“True, I may be overthinking, but I still don’t have any proof to the contrary.”

“But that’s...”

“Suppose the nature of the Box as ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ described it is fact. Even then...” Otonashi suddenly claps her hands together with a loud *pop*.

I flinch at the unexpected noise.

“Say he took control of you just then. I wouldn’t have any way of confirming that. That means I’d be talking to him under the assumption that he’s ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ the whole time. I can’t tell when you switch places. It’s possible I might accidentally leak an important detail to ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’ That’s why things are so dangerous. It’s essentially the same issue as the one with my bike earlier.”

I can’t deny the truth of what she’s saying...but I know I’m “Kazuki Hoshino.”

“Here’s another example of what I mean: You think you’re ‘Kazuki Hoshino,’ right?”

“Of course I do.”

“But what if you’re someone else who simply believes they’re him?”

“That’s...”

I’m about to say that’s not possible, but I stop midway.

In that case, what could possibly prove I am actually “Kazuki Hoshino”? My appearance? My personality? My memories? In the same way, what makes “Yuhei Ishihara” actually “Yuhei Ishihara” despite inhabiting my body?

No, I'm getting this wrong.

I *am* "Kazuki Hoshino." There's no mistaking that. *I will never let myself doubt that.*

"I was just speaking of one possibility. Don't brood over it too much. But you do understand why I can't trust you, right? I have yet to solve the puzzle of this Box—this 'Week in the Mud,' so to speak. Until I do, I cannot allow myself to trust any personality that inhabits Kazuki Hoshino's body."

So when will she get to the bottom of the "Week in the Mud" and begin trusting me again? I guess that time will never come as long as "Yuhei Ishihara" is in my body.

She doesn't trust me. Otonashi is supposed to be on my side, but she still doesn't trust me.

I spot the closest train station.

My feet come to a halt.

"Why are you stopping? The train is going to be here soon."

"...Why do we even need to go to school?"

I forgot, since Otonashi is with me. If everything was normal, then of course I would go. Even if things weren't, I would probably still go as a way of fighting back. Under the current circumstances, though, the more I go to school, the more I irreparably damage any place for me there, if I even have one left.

"We're going there to gather information about 'Yuhei Ishihara.' He has to be someone close to us, and the only people who would have contact with both of us would most likely be other students at our school. It's obvious how important it is to go and find what we can."

"But you could probably do that without me there..."

"The conditions for finding information will change greatly depending on whether you're there or not. Today is also our last day of school before the break, so we can't let it go to waste," she says.

She's basically telling me she doesn't care whether my life goes to hell if it means getting a Box.

I had it wrong all along. I thought Otonashi really was on my side, but that's not the case at all. She isn't with me to help me; she's here on a mission to encounter O again and obtain a Box.

So what does that make me in her mind? Probably...

...just bait for catching O.

"...Kazuki, I understand why you're depressed about going to school, but you must know it's for the best, right? It isn't like you to merely stand there when you know what needs to be done."

Otonashi is trying to admonish me, but I'm sure it's to serve her own purposes.

After all, she doesn't trust me.

Still, since I can't even see "Yuhei Ishihara," let alone confront him myself, I need to work with someone, and she's the only person who comes to mind.

Confiding in someone in this situation is essentially putting my life in their hands. All I can do is have faith that the things she's telling me are true. If Otonashi wanted to lead me into a trap, it would be pitifully easy for her to do so.

"...So what do we need to do at school?"

But despite all that, she's the only partner I've got.

"Good question. For example..."

She lays out several ideas, all of which I agree with. I'm not surprised she can rattle off good plans, but it also makes me scared to think of what she'd be capable of if she betrayed me.

"Do you have ideas?"

I think it over, but I can come up with only one thing. "How about if I start calling you by a different name?"

"...What do you mean?"

"I'll call you Aya instead of Otonashi. 'Yuhei Ishihara' doesn't know that name, so he'll never use it. That way, when I call you Aya, you'll know for sure it's

really me. What do you think?”

Otonashi falls silent for a moment.

“Don’t think it’ll work?”

“...No, I think it’s a good plan. Let’s try it out,” she agrees, but for some reason she doesn’t seem happy about it.

So it’s back to “Aya Otonashi.”

It occurs to me that Aya Otonashi is the name of a fictitious person who never existed in my everyday life. It’s also the name of someone I once considered an enemy.

May 2 (Saturday), 8:11 AM

I can feel the air in the classroom drop a few degrees the moment Otonashi and I enter the room together.

No one says hello to me, as expected.

Not Daiya, of course, and not even Haruaki. Kokone’s seat is still empty. She might not be coming to class today. Because of what I did? ...I’m sure it has to be.

I bite my lip as I go and sit at my desk.

I’m sure Otonashi didn’t know the extent of my situation. She regards me sadly for a moment but quickly recovers her composure. After a quick look around the classroom, she loudly claps her hands twice.

“Can I have your attention for a moment, everyone?”

All eyes in the classroom are instantly on us, though we were already the center of everyone’s focus to begin with.

“Do any of you know a person named Yuhei Ishihara?”

Several of the students exchange dubious glances at the question.

Otonashi said it’s highly probable that the owner is one of our classmates. I can understand her logic, since it’s extremely unlikely that someone who doesn’t know us would go so far as to use a Box to try to steal my body.

But isn't the owner this "Yuhei Ishihara" person who's inside my body? Is she suggesting that the owner is someone else?

I don't get it, but I do know asking our classmates if they know the name Yuhei Ishihara is a good idea.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing?" someone asks with an expression of undisguised contempt—it's Miyazaki.

"You again? What do you want? Do you know Yuhei Ishihara?"

Miyazaki snorts derisively and disregards her question completely. "How can you two go around together like normal after what happened?"

What's he getting at?

I glance at some of our other classmates. Their anger is plain on their faces, probably motivated by righteous indignation toward me.

Meaning, *my classmates can't stand me being with Otonashi?*

"So how about it, Hoshino?"

I can't understand what upsets them about us being together in the first place, so I have no real answer for his question. Even worse, the last thing I would want to do is ask what exactly "Yuhei Ishihara" did. All I can do is keep my mouth shut.

Miyazaki responds to my silence with an exaggerated sigh. "Whatever. I won't ask about it anymore. Now, let me share something more personal with you." In disgust, he spits, "He's my mother's common-law husband... Oh, guess I should clarify. *Yuhei Ishihara is my mother's common-law husband.*"

That's an abrupt revelation.

"...Miyazaki. Can you tell us a bit more about him?"

"Come on, now... Isn't it obvious this relationship isn't an easy topic?"

"We have our reasons for asking. Isn't my mentioning his name enough cause for conversation about it?"

Miyazaki scowls but resignedly agrees with a blunt "...Fine, I understand."

Perhaps because of the nature of the story, Miyazaki asks that we go out into

the hallway. “It’s not like I’m trying to keep any of this a secret, see?” And thus, Miyazaki starts his explanation.

His parents divorced during his first year of middle school, the reason being that they fell out of love with each other. Both of them found lovers they eventually moved in with, and for Miyazaki’s mother, that was Yuhei Ishihara.

Neither Miyazaki’s real father nor his mother wanted their son in their new homes, perhaps because he was a reminder of the lives they were leaving. While they never openly expressed these feelings, they were still never able to conceal them completely, so Miyazaki was well aware of how they felt.

I don’t know why things ended up that way between Miyazaki’s parents, but I do know it had nothing to do with him as their son. It was an undeniable betrayal, and not something that could ever be entirely forgiven.

After a bit of a dispute, Miyazaki’s father eventually took custody of him. But as it turned out, Miyazaki found that he couldn’t accept the idea of building a home with his father and new mother, either. He rejected the idea of sharing a roof with them, instead opting to live on his own in an apartment and only receive money for living expenses. This was during his second year of middle school.

It was the type of unhappy family life you see all the time in soap operas but almost never in real life, and Miyazaki apparently believed himself to be the unluckiest middle schooler in the world.

Unsurprisingly, he hated all of them. His parents for creating this whole mess, his new mother, and Yuhei Ishihara.

“They can all curl up and die for all I care.” Despite the venomous remark, Miyazaki’s voice is surprisingly free of emotion.

“I understand how you feel, but I don’t think you should say things like that.”

“Thank you so much for the nice sentiment,” he replies caustically. “Are you satisfied now?”

“Yeah. I appreciate you telling us about this. I know it couldn’t have been easy to talk about,” Maria answers.

“Huh, that’s not like you at all,” he says.

“Seems like you’ve been dealt a harder hand in life than I thought.”

“Thanks for the sympathy.”

The bell rings.

“Anyway, I’m going back to class. By the way, Hoshino...” Miyazaki didn’t look at me even once during his account of Yuhei Ishihara, but as we make our way back to the classroom, he turns his attention to me. “I may have answered Otonashi’s questions, but don’t get the wrong idea. I still think you’re despicable,” he snaps, returning to his seat.

The rest of the class is all smiles, all but shouting out *Well done!* to Miyazaki for telling me off.

I’m sure he purposely timed his remark so that everyone would hear it right as we entered the classroom.

.....What a jerk.

I slump over my desk, hiding my face in my hands.

“Kazuki, I’m going back to my class. Don’t forget what we talked about on the way to school, okay? Give it a try.”

I raise my head in resignation, take out my phone, and send Otonashi a blank message.

Otonashi checks her mail and nods approvingly. I go into my out-box and erase the evidence.

“Don’t forget to do it during class, too.”

I’m supposed to send these every ten minutes. Otonashi’s orders. Supposedly, this will help us learn when I switch from “me” to “Yuhei Ishihara.”

Since the only one who’s aware of this plan is “me,” “Yuhei Ishihara” has no way of knowing that he needs to send anything.

That said, we still don’t know all the details of the Week in the Mud, so we can’t say for certain that this method is foolproof.

“Is there anything else?”

“Nope, nothing else, Aya.”

A flicker of dejection passes across Otonashi’s face, and she eventually turns and leaves the classroom without another word.

I let out a long, slow breath.

...So Yuhei Ishihara is the common-law husband of Miyazaki’s mother? He’s the one who’s inside my body? It doesn’t make sense that the person trying to steal my identity is some adult I’ve never even met before.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, where I’d put it without thinking. I take it out right away. I’ve got a new message, so I open my in-box.

The sender is Maria Otonashi.

Maybe she forgot to tell me something? Or maybe it’s easier to communicate it over text rather than out loud.

Opening the message, I see only a single sentence, a message so simple that she was most likely accounting for the risk that I’ve switched places with “Yuhei Ishihara.”

“Don’t trust any of it.”

Ah, I think I get what she means.

Why has Miyazaki been messing with us since yesterday? The reason behind that. Now that I consider it, a possibility leaps to the forefront of my mind.

Maybe...Miyazaki is actually working with “Yuhei Ishihara.”

That’s why he’s been approaching us so much recently—so he can report back about us. There’s no way I can take his words at face value when he’s in a position to do that.

I have to say I find it difficult to believe that the Yuhei Ishihara he knows is the same “Yuhei Ishihara” who’s trying to steal my life. At the same time, I also doubt that everything he told us was a lie. His emotions while he was talking about his family didn’t seem false at all.

I look back down at my phone and read over Otonashi’s brief message again.

“Don’t trust any of it.”

...Oh, she might mean something different. Maybe she's not referring to what Miyazaki told us.

After all, I can't afford to trust...anything.

The only way I have of knowing what "Yuhei Ishihara" does while in control of my body is through other people.

But none of these other people are my allies. Not Miyazaki, not Haruaki, not Kokone, not Daiya, and not even *Aya Otonashi*. None of them are truly with me in this.

I erase the mail. Otonashi had instructed me to delete her messages as soon I read them.

My hands clench into fists.

"...Why?"

Even "Yuhei Ishihara" has allies. Why can't "Kazuki Hoshino"?

May 2 (Saturday), 9:05 AM

I'm surprised to find that "Kazuki Hoshino" has been in class. I really expected to find him bound up in Maria Otonashi's room, so I'm caught completely off guard. "Kazuki Hoshino" has a lot of guts coming to school when everyone in the class has it in for him.

Maybe Maria Otonashi forced him to go so they can gather information? If so, she's more coldhearted than I thought.

Not that any of that matters. It still won't change the outcome.

It won't alter the fact that Kazuki Hoshino's life will be in ruins.

After all, *just being with Maria Otonashi will be enough to make his normal life hell*, thanks to my little setup.

Why did I confess my love to Kokone Kirino? To bring that much more chaos into Kazuki Hoshino's life, of course.

The reason I chose this method out of all the others is simply that it has the strongest potential for revenge. I mean, how could anyone not want to get back

at this guy? Who does he think he is, acting all friendly with members of the opposite sex when he already has Maria Otonashi as a lover?

That's why I decided that putting an end to those relationships with professions of love seemed the most fitting.

I was rewarded with immediate results that created wide-reaching aftereffects. My little confession to Kirino has proven more explosive than I could ever have hoped.

Oomine actually beat him up. The remark that set those wheels in motion wasn't even actually meant to hurt Kirino. All I said to her was "Hey, hurry up and give me your answer."

I had only been trying to determine what went down between them after my initial confession of love.

But for some reason, those words had proved so incredibly shocking to Kirino that she broke down in tears, and this in turn had caused Oomine to overreact with physical force.

Why did things turn out that way? I couldn't figure it out at first, but I soon realized the answer after a little deliberation. "Kazuki Hoshino" and "Yuhei Ishihara" don't share their memories. Imagine if Kirino had already responded to what she thought was Kazuki Hoshino's romantic declaration. And then I came along and said what I did. How would Kirino have taken that? There's no way of knowing for certain, but it's worth assuming that it hurt her.

I'm not quite sure why Oomine responded as violently as he did. I've heard rumors that he harbors special feelings for her, though. It may not be apparent from the way he usually treats her, but perhaps there is a grain of truth to be found there.

I never actually saw what happened next, and I learned about it only after the fact from Haruaki Usui.

Once Oomine laid into Hoshino, most of the other kids in Class 2-3 were aware that the scuffle had started because Kazuki told Kirino he was in love with her. That was fine.

The problem was what happened next, when Maria Otonashi showed up.

Hoshino went straight to his lover's side without any hesitation, like he wanted her to comfort him. He didn't spare a moment's notice for the feelings of Kokone Kirino as she sobbed away, even though he had supposedly claimed to love her.

To make matters worse, *Kazuki Hoshino continues to associate with Maria Otonashi as if nothing happened.*

Obviously, blowing off someone as popular as Kokone Kirino would enrage his classmates. But Hoshino still has no choice but to depend on Maria Otonashi.

That's how his precious normal life fell apart around him.

Not because of anything I did, but through the actions of "Kazuki Hoshino" himself.

Nothing in the world could make me happier.

I tell the teacher I'm going to the bathroom, and I step out into the hallway. As soon as I do, I notice Maria Otonashi there watching me. Her brows furrow as she demands, "What are you smiling about?"

Apparently, I can't keep my joy from reaching my lips. "Maybe because you're here waiting for me, Otonashi."

"Hmph, I suppose you're trying to act like 'Kazuki Hoshino,' eh 'Yuhei Ishihara'?"

She figured out it's "Yuhei Ishihara" with only what we said just now?

Why am I not surprised? She came running to the front of Class 2-3 as soon as I took control.

She and "Kazuki Hoshino" must have come up with some way of telling when it's me.

"Come with me," she orders.

"Where are we going?"

She smiles faintly at my question. "What're you saying? You announced where you were going just a moment ago, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

“You’re going to the bathroom.”

May 2 (Saturday), 9:14 AM

“You sure this is okay? If word gets out that you were in here with Kazuki Hoshino, it could mean big trouble for both of you.”

Maria Otonashi leads me into one of the stalls of the girls’ bathroom.

“...Heh.”

I walk right into the stall without a second thought, and she regards me with a cold smile. What exactly is she plotting here? True, the toilets up on the third floor of the second annex don’t see much use, since there’s nothing on this floor but special-purpose classrooms. I still can’t figure out for the life of me why she would go to the trouble of bringing me all the way here, though.

“You’re right. If we get caught, we would both be suspended. Everyone in school would hate us.”

“Are you already desperate? Well then, how about we make a little bit of noise, if that’s what you want?”

“I’m game if you are.”

Her smile has just the slightest hint of derision... She must already know I’m not sincere. The plan is to assume Kazuki Hoshino’s position in life as it stands now. While I have succeeded in doing more damage to it than I thought possible, I don’t want to get him into any real trouble beyond that.

“Now then, ‘Yuhei Ishihara,’ let’s see Kazuki’s phone.”

“...Well, that was sudden.”

“Just open his pictures. Specifically, the third from the top.”

I have half a mind to refuse, but I end up playing along since there’s no point in giving her a hard time.

I open the picture in question. It appears to be a selfie taken by a cute girl in pajamas.

“So, can you tell me who that is?”

“...Is there a point to this question?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that for various reasons.”

Hmm, that was more straightforward than I expected. I take another look at the picture. I have no clue who she is, but I’m sure it’s not to my advantage to simply admit as much.

I scan the background of the picture. She’s definitely in a hospital. Now that I think about it, I did hear about a big accident that happened nearby about two months ago. Could she be the victim?

Unfortunately...I can’t remember the name they mentioned.

...Welp, I don’t know what I don’t know, so I simply toss out the first name that comes to mind and hope it’s right.

“Kasumi Mogi.” I try the name I heard the other night from the underwear girl, Ruka Hoshino.

“Sorry, but that’s incorrect.”

Damn. I smile ruefully. “I was just saying whatever since I don’t really know.”

“I lied.”

“What?”

“I lied when I said you got the name wrong. The girl in the picture actually is her, only you don’t know what she looks like,” Maria Otonashi says without even the tiniest shift in her expression.

“...That’s a dirty trick.”

“What’s dirty about it? It’s your fault for letting yourself think things would work themselves out if you managed to guess the right answer. On to the next question. How are Kazuki Hoshino and Kasumi Mogi connected?”

I still don’t understand what she’s getting at with these questions. I’m sure she’s trying to confuse me, though.

I search for an acceptable answer. “.....They’re friends.”

“And?”

I knew she wouldn't let me off the hook that easily. "I don't even know who Kasumi Mogi is, so how could I possibly know what they are beyond that?"

It's an obvious conclusion. I already said I didn't know her, so what other answer can I give? Even she should have no problem with that.

"You don't know Kasumi Mogi?"

All the same, Mario Otonashi fires back like I've committed a fatal error.

"...I thought I told you earlier. I've never seen the girl in that photo before today."

"That's true—you haven't. I hear what you're saying. *But why does never having seen her before mean you don't know her?*"

"...C'mon, you're not making sense. If I've never seen her before, how in the hell could I...?"

...No, wait.

"Interesting. Well, thanks to this, I think I'm that much closer to pinpointing your identity. You can't be in Class 2-3."

.....So that's what she was after.

It's safe to assume that Kasumi Mogi hasn't been coming to school because of her hospitalization. That's why I've never seen her before. But the members of Class 2-3 would at least know her name, even if they've never seen her in person. There's no way they wouldn't pick up on the name of the one in the empty desk, not to mention any of the other opportunities a classmate would have to hear it.

So the purpose of these questions was to narrow down the list of suspects.

"Hmph. To be honest, I had considered it highly probable that Ryu Miyazaki was the owner, but if you aren't in 2-3, that wouldn't work."

Ryu Miyazaki?

Why would she mention his name?

Don't tell me... He went and acted on his own since I couldn't give him instructions while Maria Otonashi had me trapped earlier.

“You, or to be more precise, the owner, is not one of Kazuki’s classmates yet still knows a lot about us. Not many people fulfill those conditions as far as I can tell. It’s probably someone who Kazuki or I could think of if we try, isn’t it?”

Of course, there’s no way I’m going to answer that.

“I’ve considered one other thing, about Yuhei Ishihara. Ryu Miyazaki said he’s his mother’s common-law husband. But when I think about why he would be willing to share such a thing with us, it’s only natural to reach certain conclusions about his intentions. That’s right...”

Maria Otonashi speaks with confidence.

“...There is no one by the name of Yuhei Ishihara.”

I swallow.

“It was just a made-up name from the beginning. I’m sure you or Miyazaki came up with the idea of using it. You wanted to make it seem like Yuhei Ishihara actually exists to throw us off the trail of the real owner, right? Cooking up a messy relationship like a common-law marriage was probably another move to make it harder for us to sniff around for clues.”

He doesn’t exist and was merely a diversion, eh? Wow, she really did see through our plans.

But she’s also completely wrong. Yuhei Ishihara is indeed the common-law husband of Ryu Miyazaki’s mother. The only thing is that he doesn’t exist *anymore*.

He’s dead, after all.

“Are you through? Can I talk about something now?”

Maria Otonashi scowls, probably wary thanks to my sudden desire to speak. “.....What do you want to talk about?”

“I’m sure this will be of interest to you, too. In fact, I imagine you’ve been racking your brains trying to figure this one out.”

I smile broadly as I continue.

“I’m going to tell you all about how the Week in the Mud works.”

May 2 (Saturday), 10:00 AM

Little by little, I assemble bits and pieces of information and regain control of Kazuki Hoshino. Sky. Concrete. Ground. Gravel. Maria Otonashi. My hands. Kazuki Hoshino. We're behind the school, and I'm...me.

After so many switches back and forth, I'm finally starting to get used to this, but with familiarity comes certain realizations.

This is a pseudodeath.

There's a "me" that's there when I'm not. During those times, I vanish completely. I don't even dream. It's a death visiting me in stages. If I can't put an end to the Week in the Mud before the end of May 5, I'll disappear for good, never to return. In other words, I'll die.

"Kazuki?"

It's Otonashi, standing right in front of me. I nod a silent affirmation before realizing that isn't good enough. "That's right, Aya."

Otonashi looks at her watch and frowns. I notice the battered electric guitar at her feet.

"Oh, this? I took it from the room of the light-music club."

The guitar looks really old, but judging from the fresh set of strings, it must still see regular use.

...Also, I bet she didn't ask permission before borrowing it.

"I picked it up as a hobby to relieve the boredom of the Rejecting Classroom."

Otonashi takes the guitar in hand and begins strumming. She's much better than I am; I only just barely learned to play an F chord. She stops as quickly as she started and holds the guitar out to me.

"Huh?"

"Play it. I know your sister gave you her guitar."

"Yeah, but...I'm really bad. I can't play anything."

"That doesn't matter. I want you to play for the entire time I'm talking. That way we'll know the instant 'Yuhei Ishihara' takes control again, see?"

Ah, I get it. That's why she took the guitar.

I'm so bad it's embarrassing, but I begin playing the song of a famous rock band I saw a while back in a method book.

"I'm surprised you knew my sister gave me her guitar."

"There isn't a single thing about you that I don't know," she replies without a trace of shame.

"...Aya, have you forgotten anything that happened in the Rejecting Classroom?"

My fingers keep fumbling over the strings as this question pops into my head.

"Yes, I remember it well. But if I were to be completely honest, I would have to say there are some things I have forgotten because of the sheer length of time I spent in there, especially since it was the same day over and over. For the most part, I remember everything, though." Otonashi gives me a questioning look. "Is it not the same for you?"

"Yeah, I don't remember much of it at all. I don't have any emotions to go with the memories of back then, so it's easy for them to slip away. Kind of like how it's impossible to remember the faces of each and every person you pass on the street."

Otonashi falls silent for a moment, her eyes wide.

"Huh? What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's nothing..."

Her obvious distress ends up confusing me.

"So what you're saying is that you remember hardly any of what we went through together in that Box?"

"Y-yeah."

"I...see..."

For some reason, Otonashi goes silent once more. When I look over at her, waiting for her to speak up again, she hurriedly averts her gaze.

"I suppose it makes sense when you put it that way. There's no reason to

expect you could remember things the way I do. You're not an owner, either. Ahh, I think I'm finally beginning to understand..." Refusing to meet my gaze, she mumbles, "That's why you call me Aya, isn't it...?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing."

Otonashi's typical composure returns in a flash, and she fixes me with a stern gaze.

"Hey, Kazuki, you've stopped playing."

Flustered, I start strumming again. I've forgotten where I was in the song, so I go back to the beginning.

"Thanks to your nonsense, we still haven't even gotten to the matter at hand."

"Sorry. So, what *is* the matter at hand?"

"...Right. I'm still deciding whether we can believe anything 'Yuhei Ishihara' says, so let's set that aside for now. I need to tell you about this latest Box while I can be sure that you're really 'Kazuki Hoshino.'"

I nod as if to say *Go ahead*.

"In actuality, there are different kinds of Boxes. For a simple, albeit potentially misleading, description, there are Boxes that act inwardly and Boxes that apply their effects outwardly. The Rejecting Classroom was more of an internal type, while this recent Week in the Mud is most likely an external type."

"...Um, how are they different?"

"The internal type of Boxes are the ones you get when the owner isn't certain their wish is truly possible in the real world. Kasumi Mogi, the owner of the Rejecting Classroom, wasn't fully convinced she could redo the past. That's why the Box created an entire realm where she could believe in her wish coming true instead of applying its effects to our world. Mogi and her classmates were placed inside this Box where she could believe."

I nod as I keep strumming away on the guitar.

“External Boxes are what you get when the owner does believe their wish can be implemented even in the real world. It seems the one responsible for the Week in the Mud feels that their wish can come true in the real world as long as they have the power of the Box. Simply seizing control of someone else’s body doesn’t seem too far removed from reality. It’s credible, so there’s no need to go and create a separate dimension. I think that might also be part of the reason why I can’t fully sense this Box.”

“...I’m not sure I’ve got all the details, but if the owner doesn’t think the Box’s miracle can happen the real world, it will result in an internal-type Box, and if they do believe, it will result in an external-type Box?”

“That’s the gist of it. If we want to make things even easier to understand, we can assign the Boxes a rating on a scale of one to ten. The Rejecting Classroom would be an internal level nine, while the Week in the Mud would be something like an external level four. The higher the external level, the stronger the Box’s influence on reality.”

The Rejecting Classroom had almost no influence, as evidenced by how none of the trapped students has any recollection of that time.

So I guess she’s saying this new Box, the Week in the Mud, isn’t like that?

“Ah...”

I suddenly realize the harsh reality of what she’s implying.

At present, all my classmates hate my guts. My relationships with Daiya, Kokone, and Haruaki have all been destroyed.

“S-so that means my life—”

“Will never go back to the way it was before, yes.”

I stop playing the guitar. The sound fades.

Nothing will go back to how it was? My normal life will never return? I’ll never recover my peaceful, mundane existence from this madness?

Then...*there’s nothing left.*

There’s nothing left for me to even try to take back.

The moment this realization dawns on me, everything goes black, as if someone tripped the breakers on the world. There's nothing for me to work toward. There's no point in destroying the Box. I've truly lost everything.

Nothing matters anymore.

I begin stumbling away. Otonashi says something, and I say something back. I don't know what she said, or what I replied, but none of that matters, anyway.

I want to scream.

But even if I did, no one would help me.

May 2 (Saturday), 11:00 AM

I'm in a convenience store for some reason. I'm holding a weekly manga magazine. I check the time on Kazuki Hoshino's phone. This is still partway through third period, so...why am I here at the store?

I look around me, but I don't see Maria Otonashi anywhere.

What does that mean? Don't tell me they've finally called it quits?

Though a fear lingers in my head that this could be a trap, I have to take this chance to speak with Ryu Miyazaki.

I dial the number from memory. The phone continues ringing for a time. Ryu Miyazaki is still in class, so he probably can't answer right away.

I hang up, and just as I'm erasing the evidence from the phone's history, I get a call back straightaway.

"Hello? Ryu Miyazaki?"

".....Why do you always have to call me by my full name?" he answers irritably.

"I'm nobody. I'm sure the one in your memory didn't call you by your full name, but I felt doing so was the most natural thing for me under the circumstances."

"...I see. So, don't you have something you need to be doing? What do you want?"

“You’re in the middle of class, aren’t you? Are you okay to talk?”

“...You take precedence.”

“I wonder if it’s okay for a class president to say something like that. But it makes me happy to hear it all the same. Anyway, I wanted to discuss how we’re going to proceed from here...”

“It’s probably best not to speak about that while I’m at school. How about coming by my place?”

“That’s fine with me...but you see the issue, right? I’m not sure it’ll be my time when noon rolls around.”

“That’s why I said my house. We can restrain ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ before then. It’s your turn again at one, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I see. Well then, how about I fill you in on a good way to bind someone up? It’s actually the same technique Maria Otonashi used on me...”

I explain about the handcuffs and leg restraints.

“Cuffs, huh? I suppose that could work. Can you pick some up before we meet?”

“No problem.”

“You know where my place is, right?”

“Yeah. See you later.”

I hang up and immediately wipe the call from the phone’s history.

Ryu Miyazaki’s house, eh?

Now that I think about it, this will be the first time I’ve ever been there. I’ve always held off visiting before. It’s kind of ironic that my first visit will be in this body.

May 2 (Saturday), 11:47 AM

Ryu Miyazaki’s apartment is in a wood-frame building that’s two stories tall and about two less stars than the fancy condo where Maria Otonashi lives. No auto-lock systems here. I walk up to his room on the second floor

and ring the bell.

Ryu Miyazaki pokes his head out right away.

“Got a present for you.” I hand him a brown paper bag. Inside are some handcuffs and leg restraints. Ryu Miyazaki takes the bag with almost no change of expression.

I take off my shoes and step into the apartment. The room is maybe a little over one hundred square feet, about six tatami mats in size. It’s small but well organized. As I plop down on the floor, a random thought crosses my mind. *Man, that PC covers most of his desk.*

“Oh yeah, I was going to chew you out. You acted on your own and said something you shouldn’t have to Maria Otonashi, didn’t you?”

A smirk appears on Ryu Miyazaki’s face as if to say, *You’re one to talk.*

“She noticed you were trying to throw her off the trail. I think she’s even figured out that we’re in cahoots.”

“Yeah, just as I expected.”

I frown at his unconcerned response. “...I don’t get it. You revealed that you’re working with me on purpose?”

“So it would seem.”

No, I don’t think so... That sounds like an excuse to cover up for his mistake after the fact.

“Maria Otonashi was suspicious of me from the moment I initiated contact with Kazuki Hoshino. That’s how on point she is. I decided there was no way I could continue deceiving her.”

“You still didn’t have to tell her so much, though.”

“...Your goal is to break ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ down until he gives in, right?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Well, you’re going to have to go through Otonashi to do that, since you can’t actually do anything to him directly. The only means of attacking him is through her. But I don’t need to tell you how cunning she is. She may be able to mitigate

the effectiveness of any attack we attempt through her.”

“I see your point, but...”

“What I’m saying is that we need to find someone else we can use to get at him directly without involving Otonashi. And of course it goes without saying that I’m the only one who can do that.”

“...True.”

“The easiest way to set it up was to make it clear that I’m your accomplice. If I made it *too* obvious, though, it would most likely put them even more on guard. That’s why I did things the way I did,” he explains matter-of-factly.

I smile ruefully without realizing it. Wow, he’s really considered every little contingency. I always knew I could count on him, but this is beyond my greatest expectations.

“I’ve already got a plan put together.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show him the bodies,” Ryu Miyazaki says.

“So you can extinguish the last bit of hope in Kazuki Hoshino? I’m sure witnessing a couple of corpses will give him quite a shock...”

Ryu Miyazaki’s mouth twitches up in a smile at my question. “How about if I tell him you killed them just a moment before he sees them?”

Now, that sounds interesting.

I can’t help but smile, too.

“I’ll show ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ the true depths of despair. Just you wait,” he spits.

Ryu Miyazaki casually picks up the bag and tosses me the restraints from inside.

May 2 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Who’s this guy in front of me? His sharp gaze refuses to leave my face, and I realize the owner is Ryu Miyazaki, only without his glasses.

Why am I with him?

I'm in a small room, with my hands and legs cuffed. It's apparent something bad is going down here.

What was I doing before I lost control? ...I can't remember. Everything went black as soon as I realized I was never going to get my old life back... And now I'm here.

"Are you 'Kazuki Hoshino' now?" Miyazaki asks, putting his glasses back on. The question must be his way of saying he already knows the whole story and has no intention of hiding it. "This is my house. I'm the one who tied you up."

"...What for?"

"What for? I thought 'Yuhei Ishihara' already explained all that. So we can make you give up."

Does that mean Miyazaki is acting on behalf of "Yuhei Ishihara" and not himself?

"Hoshino. Did Otonashi fill you in on how this Box works?"

I shake my head.

"So she's hiding it from you. Well, I suppose that's an appropriate choice. 'Yuhei Ishihara' told me he explained things to Otonashi under the assumption that she would pass it on to you."

I do vaguely remember she was trying to tell me what she learned from "Yuhei Ishihara."

"I'll explain things to you instead... Ha-ha, this is all so much easier now that I can be your enemy out in the open."

"...My enemy? What did you say?"

"Nothing... So, you already heard that the Box will erase you from existence in one week, right?"

"Yeah... Before we go any further, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"I can't believe anything you say. I mean, you're my enemy, right? There's no way I can accept anything you tell me on faith since you've already tried to

deceive me.”

“That’s true.”

Miyazaki accepts that at face value without the slightest hint of disconcertment.

“This has got me thinking I might make a pretty good con man, you know. It’s a new discovery. But the things I’m about to tell you are the absolute truth. If you don’t want to listen, go ahead and plug your ears... You might find that a bit difficult with handcuffs on, though,” he informs me emotionlessly. He approaches and hands me a scrap of paper from a notebook.

12 AM – 1 AM	1 AM – 2 AM	11 PM – 12 AM	Day One
2 AM – 3 AM	3 AM – 4 AM	4 AM – 5 AM	Day Two
11 AM – 12 PM	1 PM – 2 PM	3 PM – 4 PM	Day Three
9 AM – 10 AM			Day Four
			Day Five
			Day Six
			Day Seven The End

“‘Yuhei Ishihara’ gave me this.”

That means “Yuhei Ishihara” probably wrote it himself, too. The handwriting is more rounded and neat than I would have expected.

“Today is day four.”

The only thing written in the row for day four is 9 AM – 10 AM. The previous three days all have three sets of numbers each, but this day only has one. There’s nothing else written after that.

“Hoshino, surely you’ve noticed by now that your time in control of your body is decreasing with each passing day?”

“.....What?”

“Each day, ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ steals a bit more time from ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ *This paper shows the time taken from you.* So for example, 12 AM – 1 AM indicates ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ took that hour from ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’”

I look at the note again. Today has the numbers 9 AM – 10 AM in its row. That means ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ was using this body from nine to ten this morning. I know for certain I wasn’t conscious then.

“But all this shows is that I’m losing three hours per day. It’s not increasing.”

“...How about you try using that head of yours a bit more before you open your mouth? I said that those hours were taken from you, right? That doesn’t apply to that day alone. Those blocks of time remain under the control of ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’ For instance, the hour of midnight to one ^{AM} that you lost on the first day will never return.”

I still can’t quite wrap my head around what he’s saying.

“Geez, you still don’t get it, do you? Maybe it’s easier to think of it this way. Let’s divide each day into twenty-four blocks, and each day, three of those are being stolen from you. After the first day, you only have twenty-one blocks left. On day two, you have eighteen, and then on day three, you have fifteen. By the time day seven rolls around, you’ll have only three blocks left. And the instant the clock strikes at the beginning of the eighth day, you won’t have any more. In other words, game over.”

I finally understand.

I also recognize why he’s explaining all this to me. Telling me about the Week in the Mud puts “Yuhei Ishihara” at a disadvantage. There’s only one reason I can think of that he would fill me in...

“Ah, I can see the lights coming on. C’mon, you have to get it by now. I’m not lying to you here. Lies give people hope once they’re exposed for what they are, see. But the more a person truly understands that the unforgiving truth is still the truth, the greater the ensuing despair. All you need to do is reflect on your own situation a bit to know that what I’ve told you is true.”

He’s right. I can feel it in my bones.

“Shall I do the math for you? Today, ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ has seven blocks left, including this hour. Tomorrow, or the third, you’ll have nine; on the fourth, you’ll have six; and on the fifth, you’ll have three, for a total of twenty-four. Get it? You don’t even have a whole day’s worth of time left.”

Miyazaki continues, driving me deeper into a corner.

“‘Push Hoshino to the brink by telling him the truth.’ That’s why ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ wanted you to know all of this. That’s why none of what you just heard

is a lie.”

I had thought I had four days left. Unfortunately, that was a huge miscalculation on my part. The odds for battle are overwhelmingly in favor of “Yuhei Ishihara.”

In terms of how much time I have left in my body, I’m the one who’s the anomaly. Not to mention that my opponent has Ryu Miyazaki on his side.

Wow. This really is hopeless.

“You’re taking this rather well,” he says, and I can feel that it’s true. Despite the undeniably desperate nature of my predicament, I’m relatively relaxed.

I guess I can understand why, though. I surrendered all hope well before he laid any of this out for me.

“Hey, Miyazaki, can I ask you a question?”

“What is it?”

“Why exactly are you helping ‘Yuhei Ishihara’?” My query must have caught him off guard, because he falls silent for a moment. “You wouldn’t be on his side in all this if you didn’t have a good reason, right? Plus, him being in my body probably isn’t the easiest thing to believe, even if he claims he is. Am I wrong?”

...Yeah. Let’s see if I can goad him into revealing even more.

“How does this sound for a reason—what if ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ is actually you?”

If my crazy-sounding theory is wrong, he should burst into laughter.

However, for some reason, Miyazaki sharply, silently regards me for a moment.

“...So I’m ‘Yuhei Ishihara,’ am I? Well...” He flashes a quick smirk before he continues, “*You’re correct.*”

“.....Huh?”

I never would’ve expected such a response in my wildest dreams, and I’m at a loss for words.

“I’ll level with you here—I’m getting tired of this. I didn’t think maintaining my

facade would be so taxing. That's why I want to get a few things off my chest and lighten the load." Miyazaki sighs wearily. "Hoshino, do you have something you value above all else?"

"...I do."

Or to be more precise, I *did*, but now my normal life is in shambles.

"Well then, maybe you'll be able to understand how I see this. The most precious things aren't the ones you devote yourself to or the ones you constantly claim to love. No, something truly important to a person forms the very core of their being. Lose it, and you're an empty husk, a pile of flesh as limp as if your spine's been ripped out. That's why, if you really, truly value something with all your heart, then for all intents and purposes, *it is you*."

"So when you said I was correct just a minute ago, you weren't saying you're 'Yuhei Ishihara,' were you?"

"Of course not. If I were, I would never condone this bullshit."

Yet Miyazaki is helping "Yuhei Ishihara" commit exactly that bullshit because he's that important to him.

"If this is what that fool wants, then I'll be the shield and do whatever it takes to make those desires a reality. Even if it's wrong."

His attitude doesn't show a hint of pride or even resolve. He's chewing his lip bitterly with a kind of resignation, but his eyes are unhesitating and sure.

"...I understand how you feel. But why is 'Yuhei Ishihara' so important to you?"

Miyazaki mutters "...I guess you would want to know that" before elaborating. "It's probably... No, there's no 'probably' about it. It's a fact. Of course I have a reason to care so much. I mean..." He sounds pained as he spits, "*...I'm the older brother, after all.*"

"Older brother? What?" It's too sudden for me to absorb. "So you're saying the connection to Yuhei Ishihara you told me about earlier was a lie? ...But, uh..."

"Yuhei Ishihara is my mother's common-law husband; that much is true."

“Then Yuhei Ishihara and ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ are two completely different people?”

“Yeah. Involving that bastard’s name in this made things even more complicated, but that’s where we are.”

“The person inside my body is your younger brother, not Yuhei Ishihara...?”

So Miyazaki is saying he values his brother enough to conflate their existences, simply because they’re related by blood? ...No, that still doesn’t quite make sense. I have a big sister myself. Of course Roo is dear to me, but I wouldn’t say our relationship is strong enough that I would do *anything* for her.

“I told you how things are in my family, didn’t I?” Instead of answering my question, Miyazaki explains, “Everything I told you is true, even though I withheld the information about my sibling situation. My life as I knew it was dashed to pieces when my parents divorced. Children have no choice but to rely on their parents, but mine said they didn’t want me. They said I was trash, a nuisance, a mistake of the past. It broke everything inside me. Maybe it’s a trite way of putting it, but I fell into the deepest pits of despair. I wouldn’t even have called myself human back then.”

A self-deprecating smile spreads across Miyazaki’s face as he continues his tale.

“But as luck would have it, I wasn’t the only one failing to be human. The one you know as ‘Yuhei Ishihara,’ who my mother took with her, was the other. Having a fellow reject saved me. I’m sure some would call it codependence, but that relationship filled me with life again. My sibling became my core, a part of me that would be just as hard to remove as my own backbone.” Miyazaki fixes me with a hateful glare. “I never want to lose my humanity again. I will do what I have to do...to protect myself.”

I completely get it now—Miyazaki’s younger brother is truly essential to his being.

“...I still can’t accept it, though.” Before I continue, Miyazaki silently waits for me to explain. “Becoming Kazuki Hoshino won’t make him happy, not really. And I don’t think you will have protected him, either. I think the best thing for him would be to let him find his own way.”

“You’re right.” Miyazaki’s sudden admission catches me off guard.

“Then...”

“You don’t need to say it. I know. I know it all myself. But it’s simply too late.”

“...Huh?”

May 2 (Saturday), 2:00 PM

I soon learn what Miyazaki meant by “too late.”

Although I had no idea what was going on, he suddenly showed me something unexpected that made it clear the situation was past the point of no return.

“These are the bodies of Yuhei Ishihara and my mother.”

I’m in another unfamiliar house. The living room would be fairly nondescript—if it weren’t for the spread of reddish-black stains.

I look at the dead bodies.

One belongs to a middle-aged woman. The corpse’s skull is crushed. It’s caved in like a crescent moon amid a splatter of brains.

The other belongs to a middle-aged man. This must be the real Yuhei Ishihara.

His head is also smashed in, much like the woman’s, but his body has taken far more damage. His limbs are all bent at impossible angles, as if he doesn’t have any joints. The sight is enough to convey the incredible hatred it must have taken to leave the body in such a horrifying state.

As if that weren’t enough, the stench is...unbearable.

“Ahh...”

My mind is reeling after witnessing these corpses amid the putrid air. Why—Why am I seeing this?

“This is an attack on you.”

A fluorescent lamp bathes the two lifeless forms in white light.

“The murders were committed using your body. I trust you know what that means? As long as you’re Kazuki Hoshino, there will never be any escape from

this crime for you. If the police catch you, you will bear the punishment.”

His voice sounds so distant that it doesn’t quite reach me.

Miyazaki lets out a small sigh at my shock.

“.....Well, actually, we considered spinning the situation that way to bring you to your knees, but we decided against it. As I told you before, despair born of a lie turns to hope once the truth is revealed. These dead bodies are *the cause of it all*. They’re the reason my sibling wanted to be you.”

“The cause of it all...?”

So the murder of these two was what led him to try to steal my body?

Based on what Miyazaki has told me so far, the owner felt doomed to unhappiness. What would he wish for if he obtained a Box when he committed this act? Most likely, a way to take his life back.

Only he wouldn’t want to be himself anymore. Thus, stealing someone else’s identity.

“...I understand now why the owner would make this kind of wish. Still...I can’t quite figure out why you would help him in creating the Week in the Mud. Seems like you’d be better off destroying the Box and convincing him to turn himself in...”

“I can’t very well stay by someone’s side in prison, now can I?”

He has a point. Still, the most important person to Miyazaki’s identity could either get thrown in prison or become someone else entirely. I think the former sounds like the better choice, but...

“You look confused... Oh, I see. Haven’t figured it out yet, have you? I’m surprised you didn’t think of it yourself. My sibling is inside Kazuki Hoshino now. *If that’s the case, where’s the body?*”

Now that he mentions it, I haven’t paid much thought to that particular detail at all. I must have assumed in the back of my mind that his presence in my body meant that his own just disappeared.

“I’ll give you the answer. Get out your phone.”

The pieces fall into place as soon as I hear those words. I pull out my phone, open the data folder, and check my voice memos. There's one new recording. I hit the play button.

"I already killed my old body."

My breath catches in my throat. Does this mean he committed suicide after murdering Yuhei Ishihara and his mother? Why the hell would he do such a thing...?!

"I mean, it was just taking up space, after all. I won't need it anymore, since that's not who I am anymore."

...Hold on a minute. This means...

"See? I told you—it's too late. It's no longer possible for me to protect the person I tried so hard to keep safe."

...Yeah, it is too late.

Not only for Miyazaki, but for me, too.

The person "he" once was is already gone. Which means the owner is dead. Which means there's no longer any means of destroying the Box.

In other words, *there is no way to neutralize the Week in the Mud.*

We're too late. Horribly, miserably, and hopelessly.

"There's no other path for me now aside from helping the Week in the Mud fulfill its wish," Miyazaki asserts, but his tone is overly indifferent, like he's trying to suppress his emotions. That doesn't stop his point from getting across loud and clear, though.

"So you see, Hoshino.....I'm going to make you disappear."

He slowly raises his pallid face, and his eyes...are empty.

"I will cut away any thought you ever had of resisting."

Miyazaki continues, never once meeting my gaze.

"But even that's not enough for us to rest easy. There's still Maria Otonashi to deal with. That's why I came up with a plan. One that will let me break your will and put a stop to her. A way to kill two birds with one stone, if you will."

A small grin appears on Miyazaki's face.

"We're going to capture Otonashi. And we're going to make you do it."

"...And that's going to break my will?"

"Yeah. Just think about it. If we kidnap Otonashi and keep her locked up until the sixth, that naturally removes her as an obstacle. If she can't take action, there's no way you can ever undo the Week in the Mud."

Betraying Otonashi would be throwing away my only hope of getting out of this mess.

That's why it would leave me truly broken.

"Now then, time to put this plan into action... Hoshino, I'm going to keep you locked up in my apartment as bait. You can resist if you want, but I'll get you there one way or another. I'm not afraid to get violent, either. Well, once you switch out of the driver's seat, it's not like you can do anything to stop us, though."

"So...I guess all you need to do is wait for your partner to take control."

"That could allow you to justify your actions by claiming you were being held against your will. All of this is meaningless if you don't choose to betray Maria Otonashi of your own volition. We *are* trying to break you, after all."

.....I see.

"So what'll it be? You gonna fight back?"

Miyazaki pulls a set of brass knuckles from his pocket and slips them on. The look in his eyes makes it clear he isn't bluffing.

Do I stab her in the back?

Do I betray Maria Otonashi— No, *Aya* Otonashi?

Even if I do, it's not like she trusts me, anyway. Miyazaki doesn't seem to have noticed yet, but now that I know there is no way of getting my old life back, I don't feel like struggling anymore. Fight Miyazaki? That's crazy. Why would I intentionally put myself in harm's way?

"....."

And yet I still can't say it.

I can't give voice to that simple phrase, that I will betray Otonashi.

Why? I don't understand. It's not like anything will change if I don't say it. I should just give in; they'll just kidnap me anyway once the next switch comes around, so the outcome will be the same. Despite knowing all this, whenever I try to affirm my betrayal, a burning pain spreads through my chest.

"M-Miyazaki, I..."

Bam.

"—Guh..."

Miyazaki makes good on his violent threats. I crumple to my knees, unable to even cry out fully.

He looks down on me with the same vaguely empty expression. I can tell he has no intention of listening to anything I say. He'll simply go straight for another hit if I show any signs of resisting.

I know now. The only thing I can do is make the decision to betray her.

What's the big deal? Aya Otonashi was my enemy anyway.

Miyazaki grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me to my feet. As I totter defenselessly, he drives his fist into my stomach again.

"C'mon. Say that you'll do it. Say it."

"Just..."

It won't change anything, so there's no reason to hesitate.

Even so, why...?

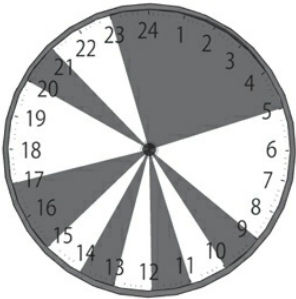
"Just...lock me up."

Why does that sickening request all but break my heart?

May 2 (Saturday), 11:10 PM

I'm dreaming.

It's the same dream again.



May 3 (Sunday), Constitution Day

May 3 (Sunday), 7:12 AM

I wake up. The sensation isn't like when I regain control of my body; it's just the normal rise-and-shine routine.

I'm on the floor of Miyazaki's apartment, my hands and feet restrained.

Miyazaki is sitting on his bed. There are dark circles under his eyes. It's likely he hasn't slept properly these past few days.

Noticing that I'm awake, he pulls out a wipe and rubs down my face. The cool menthol on the tissue helps clear away my drowsiness.

"Here are your orders."

As soon as he's cleaned me off, Miyazaki starts right in without so much as a curt "G'morning."

"You're going to show your willingness to betray Otonashi by restraining her arms and legs. Nothing else matters in the meantime as long as you do that. Simple, right?"

"...You're telling the truth?"

"What?"

"If I do it, you'll accept that you've beaten me?"

Whether they do is entirely up to "him." Even after I catch Otonashi for them, there's no guarantee they won't merely claim they aren't sure I'm truly defeated and come at me with even crazier demands.

"Yuhei Ishihara' will be satisfied with stealing Maria Otonashi away from you, according to our talks in the past."

"Stealing her away from me...?"

What the heck does that mean? I don't understand at all. Then I remember the e-mail from before:

"My wish has been granted. Now you and I can be together."

Now I get it.

He mistakenly assumed that Otonashi and I were in a relationship. That's why he believes he'll inherit my connection to her if the Week in the Mud reaches its conclusion.

That's absurd, though. He may take over my body, but that doesn't mean he'll automatically assume control of everything about me, too.

"There's no way he can steal her from me," I say quietly.

"Yes, there is."

I almost leap out of my skin. The answer comes in a voice I shouldn't be able to hear.

"I am the one and only Kazuki Hoshino. That's why Maria Otonashi will be mine, just like that."

It's coming from the speakers of a desktop computer, which Miyazaki is using.

"You probably think that sounds crazy. You must be sure I could never become Kazuki Hoshino, since you're him."

Of course I do. I am Kazuki Hoshino, so there's no way anyone else could be.

"Tell me this, then: What really makes Kazuki Hoshino himself? At the very least, I doubt you can tell by personality alone. If you haven't seen someone for a while, you would probably assume they're still the same person even if their aura or character has completely changed, right?"

The question now reminds me of a similar remark I once heard from someone else.

"If you see a person acting in a way that is unlike them, do you think they must be a different person? Do you think they've been possessed?"

"...Ngh!"

It's true. Daiya, Kokone, Haruaki—they all believed "he" was Kazuki Hoshino. Even Otonashi, who has been with me for so long...

"Not even Maria Otonashi can distinguish between us, can she?"

"...Ugh."

“Still, she knows there is a Box involved, so she may treat the loss of ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ as the loss of Kazuki Hoshino himself. That’s why I’m going to show her that he won’t disappear, even if ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ assumes his identity. That will keep Kazuki Hoshino alive within her mind.”

Giggling emanates from the speakers.

“If I can pull that off, then Maria Otonashi will be mine.”

As long as Kazuki Hoshino’s appearance remains the same, he will be taken as such, no matter how much his nature may change. There’s a certain logic to it. I can’t dismiss these claims out of hand.

.....However, I think it’s an exaggeration to claim he can actually become me.

“You think it’s a far-fetched argument, don’t you?” Miyazaki says accusingly.

I clamp my mouth shut.

“Hoshino, what would you do if you found out someone very dear to you had multiple personalities?”

“Huh?” I’m confused at the sudden hypothetical.

“Is only one of those personalities the person you love? Do you carefully pick through them and decide ‘This one’s important’ or ‘I don’t like this one’ or ‘I don’t really care about this one’? Of course you don’t, right? If you truly care for someone, they will be a single, precious entity for you, no matter the nature of their personality.”

“.....You may be right.”

“That’s why it doesn’t matter if it’s you or ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ inside. Once someone recognizes the body as Kazuki Hoshino, their feelings for him automatically carry over. If you’re important to Maria Otonashi at all, those feelings aren’t directed toward the personality known as ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ No, what she most likely values is...”

His expression remains unchanged as he explains.

“...your very existence.”

It’s a powerful statement. However, it’s not enough to crush me.

“...I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think I’m that important to her.”

Miyazaki sneers. “Maybe you’re too close to the situation to notice it yourself. I can see it, though. Otonashi is dependent upon you. That’s why the loss of your personality could prove to be an unbearable defeat for her. She would seek out something to fill that void, and I think we both know what the easiest alternative would be.”

“...You mean ‘Yuhei Ishihara’?”

“Not quite. *He may have changed, but Kazuki Hoshino will still be there.*”

“And so Maria Otonashi will be his...? That’s all in your head, Miyazaki. What makes you so confident things will work out that way?”

“*Because she’s just like me,*” he replies blandly.

“Huh?”

“I’m dependent upon someone else, too, just like she is. That’s how I know what will happen to her and that she can be obtained.”

I’m finally starting to understand why Miyazaki’s claims hold so much power.

He knows. He appreciates what it’s like to watch the person he cares about disappear and become something else.

“We’re wasting words here. All you need to do is sell her out. Once you do, Otonashi won’t be able to tell ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ from ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’”

“.....And why is that?”

“I’m sure it’s never entered into her mind that ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ would take action against her. Even if you’re the one who puts the cuffs on her wrists, she’ll most likely believe ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ is responsible. But it’s actually ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ She’ll lose confidence in her ability to distinguish between you. What’s more, *it’ll break down the barrier between the two personalities.*”

And so she would see us as one and the same.

If that’s the case when May 6 arrives, Otonashi will be able to accept it without resistance, even if “he” has taken over. That’s what Miyazaki is saying.

“Do you see what I’m getting at now? Good, I’ll tell you what you need to do.”

“...Wait.” I cut him off.

“What is it?”

“What happens if ‘he’ doesn’t believe he’s been completely successful in taking Otonashi from ‘me’?”

That’s the most likely outcome. It’s not like she and I were ever in a relationship, so it’s not really possible to take her from me if she was never mine to begin with. This can’t possibly work out as planned.

“Would you start hurting her since you have her tied up? Would you use me to do it again?”

Miyazaki ponders silently for a few moments. “Yeah.” He continues unapologetically, “So what?”

“‘So what...?’ Th-theres no way... I could never do that. Sure, I decided to set her up for you, but that doesn’t mean I’m willing to do anything else to her...”

“Are you trying to get yourself slugged again?”

“.....But I still can’t do it, now that I know.”

Any pain I suffer doesn’t matter. All I have to do is endure it.

But I can’t stand the thought of someone else getting hurt because of me, and not because I consider Otonashi an ally. That has nothing to do with it. No, the very idea of wounding another with my actions is sickening.

After observing me for a few moments, Miyazaki breathes out a terribly disappointed sigh.

“Is this how you want it to be?”

“.....What?”

“If beating you up directly won’t work, then we’ll just have to find some other way to convince you.”

“...What do you mean?”

Miyazaki doesn’t reply and says nothing else at all.

I'm in front of Kazuki Hoshino's house.

"This is a really twisted idea you came up with," I say.

"How so? An idea like this is nothing if it means helping you. Besides, you're the one who actually has to see it through." He's so matter-of-fact.

"Do you really think Underwear Girl will cooperate? Aw, I hope she does, for her sake."

"Well, let's pray that everything goes smoothly," says Ryu Miyazaki. It's like he's trying to show everyone that he's totally uninvested in what's about to happen.

No—maybe it really doesn't mean anything to him at all.

Maybe nothing matters to him, now that what's done is done. I don't have any proof, so it's just a hunch.

"Okay, I'll be back in a bit."

"Right." I open the front door without ringing the bell, as I should. "I'm home." I go up the stairs.

Ruka Hoshino is asleep in her underwear as usual.

May 3 (Sunday), 10:06 AM

Miyazaki is holding a phone to my ear.

"N-nooooooooo!!!"

I can hear someone screaming through the phone. I recognize the voice right away. I hear it every day.

"Roo...!!"

"Why are you doing this?! Stop it, Kazu!!"

"Ah—!"

What... What did they do?! What did they use my body to do to her?!

"See? This is what happens when you don't do as you're told."

"But Roo has nothing to do with any of this! She's not involved, so why would you—?!"

“Probably because we knew hurting someone innocent would be especially painful,” Miyazaki replies.

I lunge for him...but I fail miserably and end up toppling over.

I forgot that they have me bound hand and foot. Without a hint of a reaction, Miyazaki plants his foot on top of me where I lie in a miserable heap on the floor, and he puts the phone to my ear again.

“Listen to the rest. That way you can find out exactly how things went down.”

“Ungh...”

I can’t very well plug my ears, so I clamp my eyes shut instead, even though doing so doesn’t help at all.

I hear more voices from the phone.

“Gotchaaaaa!”

“Huh...?”

“Why did you want me to say all that, Kazu? I’m kinda worried about you.”

I look up at Miyazaki, stunned.

What the hell is this? A joke...?

Miyazaki removes his foot. Still focused on his blank face, I get up off the floor.

“Why are you acting so relieved, Hoshino?”

“What?”

“Those were recordings made using the phone’s voice-memo function, not real-time audio. What if I played the last recording first and the first recording last?”

“N-no!”

“I’m kidding.”

“Ugh...”

It’s pitiful how easily they can toy with me.

“Sheesh... What’re you going back and forth like that for? What you should be worried about isn’t whether your sister has been hurt or not. No, the issue is that Ruka Hoshino isn’t even the tiniest bit on guard against ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’ It would be so easy to do just about anything to her.”

With that said, Miyazaki stomps on me again, this time grinding his heel into me.

“‘Yuhei Ishihara’ will soon become Kazuki Hoshino in actuality. Can you imagine how much of a nuisance it’ll be to have an older sister? Especially sharing a bedroom with her. She’ll notice something different about him, of course, but it’s not like he can simply break off all ties with her as a sibling. She could end up becoming the greatest wrench in the works. Apparently, the question is quite troubling. *How to get rid of her, that is.*”

Having said his piece, Miyazaki presses a couple of buttons on the phone again and plays a recording.

“You’ll betray Maria Otonashi for us, won’t you, ‘Kazuki Hoshino’?”

It’s a threat.

It’s a simple one, easy to understand. If I don’t do what they say, they will kill Ruka Hoshino.

“So, what’s it going to be, Hoshino?”

If I put Otonashi in cuffs, it could lead to her being hurt. But if I don’t, it could get Roo killed.

There’s no way I can make that choice! ...But Otonashi wouldn’t be losing her life.

Plus, knowing her, she might be able to find a way to overcome this on her own. No, I’m positive she will.

...She will find a way to beat *us*.

May 3 (Sunday), 9:04 PM

“Otonashi still hasn’t found us, eh...? I’ve got to admit I’m surprised. I would’ve thought she’d pick up on this place pretty much instantly,” Miyazaki says. “She may not know you’re being held captive, I guess. ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ did

go back home, for one thing. Yet she should've noticed something was up when you didn't return any of her calls... Hey, Hoshino, did you and Otonashi have a fight or something? Is that why she isn't worried that you aren't picking up your phone?"

I have no answer to that, mainly since I don't remember how we parted ways after my despair overtook me and turned everything black.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. We were about to make our move, anyway," he says, taking out my phone.

The reason we haven't done anything until now is that we didn't know exactly when "my" time today would be until I lost control at seven PM. Everything after that was charted out, though. We know for certain that I will be "me" until eleven PM.

"...Oh yeah, I almost forgot something."

Miyazaki pulls out a roll of tape and puts a double layer over my mouth. My hands and feet are restrained, so I can't pull it off.

He begins making a call. As for who...I don't really need to say.

"Hello?"

".....*Who is this?*" The room is very quiet. I can hear Otonashi's voice clearly.

"Ryu Miyazaki."

"...*Miyazaki, why are you calling me from Kazuki's phone? What's happened to him? I know you're in league with 'Yuhei Ishihara'...*"

"In league with him? You think I'd help scum like that? He found something he could use against me and threatened me."

What is Miyazaki saying...?

"*Something to use against you?*"

"That's right. I didn't help him willingly. He trapped me and used me to do his dirty work. I think I've had about as much of that as I can take, though. Luckily, I've come up with an easy plan to set all this right."

"*A plan...?*"

“I’m sure you’ll figure out what it is if you put your mind to it. It’s quite simple.”

“.....You can’t mean...”

“You guessed it—all we have to do is kill Kazuki Hoshino.”

Miyazaki’s tone is all business without the slightest change in emotion. That’s when I begin to realize he’s lying. His acting is almost too natural; I know the truth, and even I was nearly convinced for a moment.

I don’t think Otonashi is likely to see his deception for what it is.

“...What a load of nonsense. I don’t know what exactly ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ has on you, but the risks of what you’re suggesting are too great to ignore. I don’t think you’re stupid enough to choose that path, either.”

“What a straightforward response. I thought you’d have a better knack for deception than that.”

“.....”

“Murder is always a dangerous bet. The payoff is never worth it. But none of those risks apply to Kazuki Hoshino as he is now. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you why.”

“...I don’t follow.”

“Ha-ha, don’t play dumb with me. I’ll tell you, anyway. This is a risk-free murder because *all we need to do is get him when control of his body changes hands.*”

Otonashi must have realized the same thing. Just yesterday, she was telling me about the dangers of a switch occurring while we’re on her motorcycle. If you built a foolproof plan around that premise, it would be a cinch to paint the death as an accident or suicide.

That’s what Miyazaki means by a risk-free murder.

“If I can put an end to that bastard and his threats and get away with it scot-free, I’ll do it.”

“...Why are you telling me your plans?”

“If you had a bullet that would never be found after it’s shot, there’s probably someone you’d want to use it on, right? But let’s say doing that would also eliminate someone you have nothing against. You’d have some pity for them. That’s why I figured I would at least let him hear the voice of his lover one last time.”

“You’re only thinking of yourself...”

“Am I? Hoshino only has a few hours left in that body, you know. He might as well be dead already. Don’t you worry; I’ll make sure to do the deed when it’s ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ in control. Think of it as more of a mercy killing for Hoshino. I’m sure he would want to die before that human filth assumed his identity completely, anyway. Don’t you agree?”

“Kazuki will take his body back!”

“That’s just what you want to think. Given the circumstances, I doubt anyone would be that optimistic about his chances, unfortunately.”

“Grr...”

“Anyway, that’s that. Now I’ll let you hear his last words.”

So he says, but of course Miyazaki has no intention of removing the tape covering my mouth.

He moves the cursor to a file and double-clicks it. Kazuki Hoshino’s voice plays from the speakers.

“Help me...”

It would’ve been the oldest, easiest line in the book...

“...Aya.”

...if not for what came next.

How do they know that name...? There’s no way they could have heard it, especially since they know nothing of the Rejecting Classroom.

Wait... Maybe they did. I have used it in Class 2-3’s room. Miyazaki must have picked up on it as some kind of code and told “him” about it.

Otonashi won’t realize this, since she’s unaware who’s speaking. And so...

“.....I’ll be there for you soon, Kazuki.”

...Otonashi is fully convinced the voice belongs to me.

“You made a mistake,” she asserts with force. “If you were going to call me, you should have done it right before ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ took control. It’s nine twelve now. The earliest you can make your move is at ten sharp. There’s still forty-eight minutes left. That’s plenty of time for me to stop you and take him back.”

Her threat is misguided.

She has no idea her words don’t strike fear into Miyazaki so much as put him at ease.

May 3 (Sunday), 9:32 PM

And just like that, she arrives. Not even twenty minutes have passed since the call.

She smashes through the window in a spray of glass. Clad in street clothes instead of her school uniform, she walks into the center of the room, the broken shards crunching under her sneakers.

“...Here so soon? It’s almost like you knew exactly where we would be.”

Miyazaki faces her from where he stands, holding a kitchen knife pressed against me in the hallway leading to the front door.

“You think it was difficult to figure out? I knew you wouldn’t make a call like that in public, so in all probability, you were at your home. No other place seemed likely.”

“Still rather fast, don’t you think?”

“I made it a point to learn your address the moment it became apparent you were working with ‘Yuhei Ishihara’... But enough of that. Let Kazuki go. You said yourself that you don’t think murder is worth the risk. If you stab him now, it’ll be more than a risk. It’s a guaranteed assault charge, at the very least.”

“Shut up.”

“There’s no need to fly off the handle just because things aren’t going how

you planned. All you really want is for 'Yuhei Ishihara' to stop blackmailing you, correct? Hand Kazuki over to me, and I'll show you that I can put an end to his threats."

"You're just saying that." He's acting agitated and ignoring her.

Why is Miyazaki behaving like this?

...It's all a show to set her up for the fall.

Miyazaki is playing the part of the stereotypical villain so that my betrayal will shock her even more. Otonashi will defeat the dastardly Miyazaki and rescue me. She'll be relieved, maybe even a little excited.

And then I'll stab her in the back.

So to build it up as much as possible, Miyazaki can't afford to be reasonable and let me go.

"Just leave. You already had your final rendezvous here."

"Quit being stupid."

I'm curious as to why Otonashi hasn't rushed Miyazaki yet.

Yeah, he's got a knife pressed to my throat at the moment, but it's an empty threat. Miyazaki wants to commit this risk-free murder only because he's up against the wall himself (or so it would seem), so there's no reason he would choose to stab me and wreck any hope of doing that.

"And here I had you pegged as a person who thought things through logically without letting emotion get the better of him."

Otonashi sure seems aware that Miyazaki has no intention of stabbing me. Yet she still isn't coming any closer.

"Calm down, Miyazaki."

From her perspective, she can't say for certain that the blade won't touch me. If Miyazaki gets too panicked, he could even harm me by accident.

.....Is that why?

Is she holding off because she isn't 100 percent sure I won't get hurt?

“.....”

No, of course not...

After all, Otonashi has no reason to go to such lengths to protect me. I may not know what it is, but something is preventing her from taking action. She's reached a deadlock.

With his free hand, Miyazaki prods me in the side where Otonashi can't see.

.....I know, I know.

Obviously, he had given me instructions in case of a standstill like this. I don't like having to take the initiative in this, but I have no choice.

Miyazaki told me to do this like I mean it or else Otonashi will figure out it's a ruse. I swallow hard once, then play my part.

With all my might, I bite down on Miyazaki's hand.

“...Agh!!”

His yell is no act, but a genuine reaction of pain. He drops the knife as naturally as he said he would when he went over the plan.

We've created an opening.

Otonashi doesn't let it pass.

It's over in an instant.

The room is only about a hundred square feet. Before I know it, she's right in front of us, and the momentum of her forward lunge carries her into a powerful head-butt right on the bridge of Miyazaki's nose. As he cradles his face, she places herself between us and slams her fist into his jaw, sending him staggering back. He stumbles, and she quickly scoops up the knife and flings it out of reach.

“Get back, Kazuki.”

I nod and move away.

Otonashi gets some distance from Miyazaki and says, “Give me the keys to the cuffs and leg restraints, Miyazaki. I'm going to set him free.”

“...You’re more weak-willed than I would’ve thought,” he replies through his hands as he tries to staunch the flow of blood from his nose. “You should have gotten me by the neck. Then I would’ve had no choice but to hand over the keys.”

“...There was no need for that.”

I suddenly remember something. That’s right—Otonashi doesn’t like violence. She was able to do what she did just now only because it was justifiably necessary to save me. Otonashi could never strangle Miyazaki and force him to give her the keys.

Miyazaki recovers his balance and lowers his center of gravity for a fight. He lunges for Otonashi and even gets a hand on her, but the moment he makes contact, his body is airborne.

“Wha—?!”

That’s not acting, but a real cry of shock.

It happens so quickly that I don’t even see him before he hits the ground. A picture-perfect shoulder throw.

“Come at me again, and you’ll get more of the same.”

“...Dammit, I never heard you were a judo expert.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t have. I am just a white belt, after all... Though I have taken down more than a few black belts in my time,” Otonashi says, wrapping an arm around his neck and pinning him to the floor on his side in a *kesa-gatame* hold.

“Ngh...”

“I heard something metallic when I threw you.”

Using her free left hand, Otonashi searches the pockets of Miyazaki’s jeans. She quickly finds what she’s looking for and tosses it over to me. The keys to my handcuffs and leg restraints land on the floor with a clatter.

“Kazuki, how many minutes after the hour is it? I need you to be exact.”

“...Thirty-nine.”

“We should still be okay, then. Kazuki, I want you to get your phone and escape through the veranda. I’ll catch up with you in five minutes. In the meantime, I’m going to make sure he can’t cause any more trouble.”

Miyazaki gives me a quick glance. No need to worry; I’m not going to do what she says. She still has him in a headlock, though, so I can’t very well cuff her arms and legs. What do I do? I can’t catch her like this.

I look down.

I spot something, and I get an idea.

It’s the worst but, by the same token, the most meaningful means of betraying her.

Yes, I am now a true enemy of Aya Otonashi. I had a feeling it could come to this once I made my choice. All the same, it feels so despicable.

I don’t pick up the keys on the floor, because I actually had my own set all along. I remove my restraints.

Now that I’m free to move again...*I pick up the knife Otonashi tossed aside.*

“Aya.”

I turn the blade in my hand toward Otonashi. I’m sure she’ll see right away that I lack the courage to actually stab her. That’s fine. My betrayal will still be a success even if she does.

“Let go of Miyazaki and stay still.”

Otonashi notices the weapon pointed at her.

And then...

“Huh...?”

The one voicing surprise isn’t Otonashi, but me.

All I did was aim the knife at her, but her eyes have gone wide, and her breath has caught in her throat. I have never seen her look so completely vulnerable. Seeing his chance, Miyazaki wriggles free of her hold on him. Even so, Otonashi herself sits rigid and motionless.

With the blade still leveled at her, I approach where she’s sitting frozen in

shock and stoop down to put the handcuffs on her wrists. She doesn't resist and speaks only once both her hands are trapped.

"What... What are you doing, Kazuki?" She's struggling to get the words out. "What is this...? I... I don't understand. Why are you pointing that knife at me...?"

"Uh, probably because he's betrayed you?" Miyazaki answers for me.

"Betrayed me...? There's no need for him to do that. If it weren't for me, Kazuki would have no hope of resisting the Week in the Mud. He'd never turn on me, not unless you wore him down until he gave up. But that's not possible. There's no way he would betray me..."

"Well, you said it yourself. We did wear Hoshino down, and he gave up."

"Gave...up?"

My eyes dart away from Otonashi's imploring gaze.

"Pfft."

Miyazaki can't contain his laughter any longer.

"Heh-heh...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, come on, Otonashi—what the hell is with you? Gimme a break! I had planned to fight you as my toughest opponent; I never would've guessed you were fragile enough to completely lose it once little lover boy here went turncoat on you! Talk about a letdown!"

"Kazuki." Otonashi doesn't spare a glance for Miyazaki and his laughter. Her eyes have remained on me the entire time. "Is this true? Did they really break you like he says?"

".....Yeah." I choke the word out.

When she hears my response, she lowers her head until I can no longer see her face and begins trembling.

"Whoa, hold on a sec. Now you're shaking? Don't tell me you're gonna start bawling your eyes out? Hey now, you can't be serious! Holy shit, this is hilarious!!" Miyazaki keeps howling with laughter at the unexpected success of his plan. "By the way, Otonashi. I'll let you in on a little something. That is definitely 'Kazuki Hoshino' you're looking at, not 'Yuhei Ishihara.' He's the one

who stabbed you in the back and slapped those cuffs on you, nobody else!!”

“.....I know that.”

Her head remains lowered as she replies.

“What?”

“I’m well aware this is ‘Kazuki Hoshino’ and not anybody else.”

Otonashi climbs to her feet without raising her head. I can’t see her face. She stumbles in my direction. Though I’m still holding the knife out before me, her odd behavior causes me to step back. I bump against the wall.

Without looking up, she slams her cuffed hands against the wall above my head with a loud *thud*.

“Kazuki, did you really allow someone like him to take you down?” Her voice is low and monotone. My shoulders slump, and I fearfully turn my eyes back toward Otonashi.

She slowly raises her eyes to meet mine.

I see now... She wasn’t trembling with fear; she was trembling with anger.

“You, the only person to defeat me since I became a Box, lost to a couple of softheaded weaklings like them?! Are you trying to mock me...?! You wanna tell me those pathetic wimps are better than me...?!”

Earlier, she had been keeping the tone of her voice in check, but now it’s growing louder and louder.

“How dare you! How dare you! Don’t waste my time with this crap! There’s no way your faith could be broken by scum like them...!!”

She slams her cuffed hands again. I squeeze my eyes shut on reflex. Another blow sounds against the wall. I hear a loud noise above my head. I slowly open my eyes again and see her beet-red face nose to nose with mine, her teeth grinding in frustration.

“H-hey, what’s gotten into you, Otonashi? Did the shock of Hoshino’s betrayal send you off the deep end or something?”

“You need to shut up,” Otonashi snaps, never taking her eyes off me. “...I

knew something was off after that phone call. But I was sure you wouldn't go along with whatever demands they made. That's why I accepted Miyazaki's words at face value. But then I come here and find you like this... Damn it! You have to be kidding!"

Otonashi looks down at the kitchen knife in my hand as if she's just noticing it for the first time. Her face warps in disbelief, and she begins to ridicule me even harder.

"...And what do you think you're doing with that knife? You going to stab me if I don't do what you say? Ha-ha, that's rich. Fine, stab me if you want. I'm wide-open. Do it, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon. As if you actually could!"

"Ngh..." I find myself lowering my arm.

"Tell me. How did this happen? ...Tell me!"

I lower my gaze, gritting my teeth at my miserable state, and I tell her. "They took my sister, Roo, hostage. I had no choice but to do what they said."

"And that's all it took."

"That's all?!" Roo is my only—"!

"You're the guy who was prepared to let someone he loved become roadkill."

I swallow nervously.

"Hold up a minute, Otonashi," Miyazaki interjects.

She reluctantly turns back toward him. "What? Surely you can see I'm busy here."

"Well, it's just that I'd think you probably wouldn't want to believe this is 'Kazuki Hoshino' after he did this to you. Why aren't you questioning your belief that this is really him?"

True, that is one point Miyazaki can't afford to ignore. After all, his main goal is make it so she can't tell us apart.

"You say some pretty stupid things, you know that? Kazuki will always be Kazuki, no two ways about it. Nothing can change that fact."

"But how can you tell which is which?! ...I see—you were already primed to

believe it. You assumed that the voice crying for help on the phone belonged to ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ The reason you aren’t questioning things now is that you’ve been under that assumption the entire time.”

“I knew that ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ was the one on the phone.”

Miyazaki scowls. “Quit lying. So, what, you’re saying you could tell it was a recording?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Okay then, how did you know it wasn’t ‘Kazuki Hoshino’?!”

“How could I *not* know?” she retorts, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Kazuki wouldn’t use the name ‘Aya’ if he were truly asking for help in a situation like that.”

“.....Oh.”

I remember something.

When Daiya straddled me and punched me in the face in the music room, when I felt so completely alone, I called her by another name without meaning to.

Yeah, that’s right. I wouldn’t say that. I wouldn’t call for “Aya” if I sincerely needed Otonashi’s help. That was the name of my adversary, after all.

“...So then why did you still come to help him?”

“If the situation had been real, then helping ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ would have been same as helping Kazuki.”

“...Stop right there. Does that mean you believe the Kazuki Hoshino in front of you is ‘Yuhei Ishihara’?”

“Yeah, I actually did. But all it took was one look to know he was actually ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’”

“...Oh, come on, now that’s a lie. I know for a fact that you couldn’t tell them apart up until now.”

“That was only because I couldn’t pinpoint the timing of when they traded

places. I can distinguish them in about three seconds by the way they use their facial muscles. I'm now confident I can recognize the real Kazuki when I see him."

She can tell that I'm me? Even though no one else caught on?

"...That's impossible! Don't try to feed me that crap!"

"True, if it were anyone but Kazuki, I might not be able to differentiate so well. But with him, it's entirely possible."

"Why?!"

The next words out of her mouth explain it all.

"Because I've spent more time with Kazuki than anyone else in the world."

I heard those words so many times in that other realm.

"Aaahhh..."

A sound escapes my lips, and I place a hand on Otonashi's shoulder. She turns back to me with a disappointed expression.

Miyazaki's brows furrow as he takes this in. "What is it, Hoshino? Don't tell me those trite, unsubstantiated comments are enough to make you consider removing her handcuffs. You know what will happen to your sister if you do that, don't you?"

I don't know why, but his threat no longer seems to affect me.

"Hey, Otonashi." Once I say what comes next, there's no turning back. Though I seem hesitant, I'm already set on what I'm about to do. *"Let me touch your Box."*

The look of disappointment on her features transforms into something else.

"You don't need to ask permission. Even if I wanted to resist, I'm in handcuffs."

She says this despite the fact that she has shown almost no fear toward this knife and was slamming her hands against the wall earlier.

Otonashi smiles, with the barest hint of redness on her cheeks.

“...I’m not gonna stop you.”

She curtly grants me permission, and with a small nod, I press the palm of my hand flat against her chest.

“.....Oh.”

I’m sinking to the bottom of the ocean. This is the second time I’ve been here. It’s still the same—everyone seems so happy amid the falsehoods bringing them joy. And among them, someone is crying. She knows all about these pleasant lies, and she can’t accept them. I’ve heard these sobs before.

It hurts.

There’s no oxygen, so I can’t be down here for long. I can’t stay here forever.

Is that why it hurts?

Or is it the knowledge that I can’t do anything to ease her suffering that pains me?

Is it because I know I can’t do anything about her profound loneliness?

Tears are running down my cheeks, much like the ones I cried in another Box once before.

“...I’m so sorry.”

I’ve remembered everything that made her who she is.

How could I have assumed she was only using me as bait to catch O? Why did I believe she cared nothing for my life? Why did these ideas enter my mind when I knew this girl, who always puts herself last, would never do such a thing?

She had had faith that I could face the Week in the Mud on my own and thus stopped contacting me after I rejected her help. Yet I had failed to give her the same benefit of the doubt and even betrayed her.

“I’m sorry,” I say again.

She looks away uncomfortably. “...No, I don’t think I gave this enough thought, either. I...might have placed my own selfish expectations upon you without considering how you’ve forgotten the events of the Rejecting

Classroom... So, um, my apologies for only just figuring it out.” I shake my head. She watches me out of the corner of her eyes. “I’ll assume you really do understand and tell you something that needs to be said. Kazuki, your life will never return to the way you once knew. But...”

Otonashi returns her gaze to me, and her lips soften into a little smile.

“...we can still take it back.”

Oh...

Hearing those words, I know I will never lose my place again.

I am me.

I...am Kazuki Hoshino.

I pull the keys out of my pocket and insert them in the keyholes on her handcuffs.

“...What the hell are you doing, Hoshino?! Are you planning to throw away your sister’s life just to get in good with your girlfriend?! You have to be the biggest piece of—”

“You’re wrong. I did make a decision, but I’m not throwing away my sister’s life.”

“Then what are you doing? You know Ruka Hoshino is as good as dead if you don’t play along.”

“You won’t kill her.”

“And why is that?!”

“Simple.” What comes next isn’t a bluff but a statement of my intention. “I won’t let you. That’s why.”

I don’t have to listen to them anymore. There’s no need to be restricted to the choices they present to me. Now that I have Otonashi on my side, there’s no way I can lose. I’ve decided to entrust my everything to her.

I turn the key in the handcuffs. The shackles come undone and fall to the floor. I take her free hands in mine. She looks at me, and I look at her.

“Please help me...”

I will never get it wrong again. There's only one name I can call her.

"...Maria."

For a moment, for one single moment...

...Maria's face lights up like any other teenage girl's, as if she can't help herself.

"I have a few conditions." And her face regains its usual sternness. "Maybe this doesn't need to be said again. I have faith that you will keep this promise on your own, even if I don't say it out loud. But I'm feeling rather uneasy, and this has been painful for me. That's why I ask that you just let me say it."

I nod slightly, though I'm not sure what this is leading up to.

"I will never let you out of my sight again. So please..." Maria lowers her eyes for a second, then focuses on me and states her terms point-blank. "...don't lose sight of me, either."

Yeah... It all makes sense now.

I never noticed it until this very moment.

I wasn't the only one in pain when my internal struggles drove everyone away from me. Maria was alone and suffering, too.

I mean, ever since the Rejecting Classroom appeared, Maria *has always been* "Aya Otonashi." *She tried to be the Box.* The real her, the real "Maria Otonashi," wasn't there.

"I'm Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm not strong."

I remember the tiny bit of weakness she voiced back then. That's right—the only one who can call her "Maria" is me, the one who knows about that very first transfer.

If I forget, then "Maria Otonashi" will have vanished from the memories of everyone, perhaps even her own self, and be truly lost.

"Enough of this crap."

I release Maria's hand at the voice.

“How stupid are you guys? You can make all the pretty little vows you want, but that doesn’t do a damn thing to change the situation. Kazuki Hoshino is going to lose control of his body, and his sister, Ruka, will be killed. Do you really think waltzing off into your fantasy world for two is gonna fix any of that?”

Miyazaki surveys us with scorn.

“Try as you might, you don’t have a chance in hell of winning here. ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ is dead, after all. You can’t track down the owner of a corpse. And of course, that means you can’t destroy the Box, either. So how can you get out of this? Go ahead, tell me!”

He’s...exactly right.

The owner, Miyazaki’s younger brother, doesn’t exist. Our pledge to work together won’t change the truth.

“.....I already know the true identity of ‘Yuhei Ishihara.’”

Miyazaki’s eyes go wide for a moment at Maria’s claim, but his mouth twists into a sneer once he sees the melancholy on her face.

“So? Did you find the little idiot?”

“...No. I spent all day looking, but my searching turned up nothing.”

“Heh-heh, of course it did. You’re not going to have much luck sniffing out someone who’s dead!” Miyazaki dismisses her triumphantly.

What is this feeling, this feeling that something is terribly wrong? Why...?

“See? I told you—it’s too late. It’s no longer possible for me to protect the person I tried so hard to keep safe.”

So Miyazaki said. He claimed that the only way to protect himself was to ensure the Week in the Mud was successful, because the younger brother he cherished so much was dead.

I see it now.

“.....You’re lying, aren’t you?” I suggest quietly, and Miyazaki spins toward me. “You said he died, but that’s just something you made up. It’s so obvious

once I think about it. You'd never do any of these things or let your brother do them, either."

".....Quit running your mouth, Hoshino. Don't try to twist things to suit your view."

"He was important to you, right?"

Miyazaki frowns at my abrupt query, but he responds nonetheless. "Yeah."

"Then there's no way you should be able to laugh when you talk about his death."

It's not like a lone unnatural action like that is enough to prove he's lying. If Miyazaki manages to stay calm and dance around the question, he could manage to fool me again. However...

"Which means he isn't really dead, is he?"

However, Miyazaki has no answer for me. His head droops.

"Despair born of a lie turns to hope once the truth is revealed," I say. It's the exact same thing he once told me. As he looks back up, I add, "You were right."

Miyazaki's eyes bulge wide, and his mouth drops open. Silently, I watch him as his hands curl into fists, his teeth grind, and he fixes me with a look of pure hatred.

".....Damn you..."

But in the end, all he does is lower his eyes again.

He begins stumbling forward. He slams his hands on the desk and picks up his phone. After pressing a few buttons, he puts the phone to his ear and listens to something.

"I didn't make it in time," he mumbles, as if to himself. "I didn't make it in time! I was in the bath when the call came. By the time I noticed this message, everything was already over."

Miyazaki must be listening to that message now.

"I should've been able to help before things came to this. None of this would've happened if I had picked up on the suffering of someone other than

myself. But I was consumed by my own misery, and my inability to see anything or anyone else prevented me from noticing my own family's cry for help. And this is the result."

As he speaks, he opens the top drawer of the desk.

"I know it's too late. I know there's no more time for me to do anything. But the cries for help aren't gone. I don't want to hear them, not anymore."

He reaches into the drawer.

"I will put an end to those tears, and I'll commit whatever crime and bear whatever punishment it takes. I mean it! If you've got a problem with that, go ahead and say it!!"

"Of course we do," Maria replies. "You've stopped thinking. You aren't making a choice. You're just plugging your ears because the crying annoys you. You're satisfied with throwing yourself into a pointless struggle with us." Maria closes her eyes for a moment, but her message rings out loud and clear. "None of this will erase the past, though."

".....Yeah, well, so what?" Miyazaki mutters, hanging his head. "You plan to make it so those bodies never happened? It's impossible. There's no bright future ahead for us no matter how much we struggle. I'm just trying to grant a little fool's wish, that's all. So..."

He removes his hand from the drawer.

"...stay quiet and let me take you prisoner!!"

Miyazaki is holding a stun gun and lunges for Maria.

"Maria!!"

She quickly grabs his outstretched right arm by the wrist and twists it. Miyazaki drops his weapon with a small yelp.

"Guh—!"

I pick up the stun gun. Maria may be able to restrain him, but she can't get any more violent than that. Now it's my turn.

I meet Miyazaki's heated glare without flinching. I won't run away. If he's

going to act with hostility toward us, I have to reply in kind.

“Sorry.”

I switch it on and press it against Miyazaki’s neck. He lets out a scream, then sags to the ground limply.

“...Kazuki, we need to leave.”

“Yeah.” But as I turn to go, I realize my right leg is caught on something. “...!”

Panicked, I spin back to look. Miyazaki somehow grabbed hold of my ankle as he collapsed. His grip is so strong that I can’t shake him off, even when I try.

He lifts his head weakly as he lies there.

“.....I’m sorry.”

What is he saying?

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it in time. I’m sorry I didn’t get there soon enough to save you. I’ll become stronger... I’ll be stronger for you... So please, please, just give me another chance...!”

No, wait.

His desperate entreaty isn’t directed at me. Biting my lip, I lift my right leg, and Miyazaki’s hand falls away easily.

I press the stun gun to the middle of his back.

“.....There are no more chances.” Because I’m about to burn your wish to the ground.

I flip the switch. Miyazaki’s head quietly drops to the ground, and he is motionless.

.....I’m sorry.

I’m sure that apology was meant for “him.” Although, maybe a portion of it was directed toward “me,” too... I can’t help but wonder.

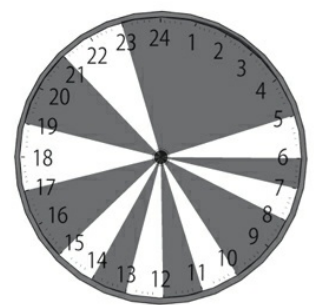
I step over Miyazaki and pick up his cell phone.

“What’re you doing, Kazuki?”

I play the voice mail he was listening to.

“.....H-hel— Help me..... Help me, Ryu.....!”

And that’s how I learn the true identity of “Yuhei Ishihara.”





May 4 (Monday), Greenery Day

May 4 (Monday), 7:49 AM

I realize my hands and feet are cuffed, and I'm lying on the floor with a blanket covering me. I'm still too groggy to think straight.

I'm in pain, but I can't tell if it's a dream or reality.

It's like I'm sinking into a bottomless swamp.

I flounder and struggle uselessly, descending deeper and deeper into the muck until I no longer even know why I'm resisting its pull. Eventually, I can't fight it even though I want to. The swamp simply swallows me up. My body is filled with slime and detritus, to the point where I myself am nothing more than filth. I'm scum, inside and out, until the sludge slathered over me erases my profile and buries me.

I can no longer see myself for the boy I am.

The boy I am, huh?

When I first gained this body, I made it a point to think of myself the way Kazuki Hoshino would, but now I do so naturally without any conscious effort. It's not so much that I've grown accustomed to it as that his physical form pushes my thoughts in that direction. I'm sure that if I let his body lead the way, I can truly become Kazuki Hoshino.

Now that I'm fully awake, I sit up. The scent of peppermint tells me where I am. Not Ryu Miyazaki's apartment, where I should be, but the home of Maria Otonashi.

I can hear someone snoring softly. Looking over at the bed, I see Maria Otonashi asleep, facing in my direction. Her expression isn't her usual tense mask. In slumber, at least, she actually looks like a girl about my age... I mean, she *is*, more or less.

"What're you looking at?" The innocence vanishes from her face as if it was never there.

“You’re cute when you’re asleep, Otonashi.”

“So it’s ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ now.”

She knows it’s me in an instant, even though up until yesterday, the hour of seven to eight in the morning was “Kazuki Hoshino” time.

Maria Otonashi sits up in bed and looks into my eyes.

“I hate to break it to you, but it seems you’re still alive.”

“.....Huh?” It’s too sudden for me to respond.

“I’m saying the owner is still among the living.”

At first, I can’t process what she’s telling me, but bit by bit, the gravity of her unthinkable claim is dawning on me.

What— What is this...?

My brain is struggling to keep up, and all I can do is stare at her face.

“Well, guess I’d better get moving. I don’t have time to spend all day chitchatting with you here.” Maria Otonashi takes a jacket out of her closet and slips it on.

“Where are you going...?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m going to look for the owner. Where else?”

If the owner is indeed alive, then that would be the natural course of action. She opens the door to the apartment and leaves without a glance behind her.

What is this? What’s happening? How exactly did I end up in this situation?

Our plan must have failed yesterday. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be in this mess now.

At any rate, I have to get my bearings. I look for a phone so I can call Ryu Miyazaki. Kazuki Hoshino’s is sitting on the table. I reach out for it...

“...!”

...and I draw my hand back in fright as it begins loudly vibrating, almost as if it were waiting for that exact moment.

Looking at the clock, I can see that it’s eight AM sharp. This hour has belonged

to me since yesterday. I'm sure Ryu Miyazaki factored this in when he timed his call.

I pick up the phone and check the number.

".....Huh?"

It's not the number I expected. This number belonged to— No, that's not possible! There's no way the owner of this number could be calling me!

But who is, then?

Trying to ignore the tremble in my fingers, I press the button to answer the call.

".....Hello?"

"....." The person on the other end remains silent.

"Hello...? Who is this?"

"Riko Asami."

"Wha...?!"

I can't say anything else.

"Why are you so surprised?"

"B-but..."

"You thought I was dead? You thought I'd been killed? Sorry, but I'm here talking to you right now."

It's unmistakably Riko Asami's voice.

"That's impossible! You're gone! Ryu Miyazaki killed you!"

"...Heh...heh-heh, I know that all too well, but you can't see anything beyond yourself. Idiot. Don't you understand? There's no way he could kill me."

Ryu Miyazaki couldn't kill Riko Asami? ...I find that hard to believe. She should've been the person he wanted removed from his life the most.

"How big of a moron do you have to be to think I was dead without doing the deed yourself? You're trash—too disgusting to even look at. I hope you get thrown in the incinerator like the garbage you are."

Mumbling quietly, Riko Asami takes advantage of my confusion to lay into me.

As the realization that she's still alive finally takes hold, I notice something.

"...Why are you talking like that?"

"Talking like what?"

"I mean, it sounds just like..."

"Like how you used to talk? Before you started acting tough? Back in those dark days when all you could do was swallow everything you wanted to say? ... You're one to talk."

Riko Asami laughs quietly as she continues.

"You haven't changed at all."

You're saying I haven't changed? After I put in so much time and effort to do so? After my admiration for Maria Otonashi led me to reinvent myself as a different person? After I'm about to become Kazuki Hoshino? ...I haven't changed after all that?

Where does *someone as pathetic as Riko Asami* get off saying that to me?!

"...Shut the hell up. Someone must have put you up to this call to piss me off, huh?"

This Riko Asami of the past, this weakling, throws my hostility right back in my face. *"That's right."*

"...Huh?"

"You're trying to steal someone else's body like you somehow deserve it, and I can't let you do that... Who the hell do you think you are? You need to be put in your place. You need to just curl up and die. That's why..."

Riko Asami's voice is free of any real emotion.

"...I'm going to destroy this Box."

"What... What are you saying...?"

"You know that I can do it. After all, I—Riko Asami—am the owner."

I have no response for that, so I stay silent. My hand is shaking as it holds the

phone.

She chuckles as she speaks to me.

“Don’t get any ideas that you’re going to make it out of this somehow, okay, ‘Riko Asami’?”

May 4 (Monday), 10:01 AM

“.....H-hel— Help me..... Help me, Ryu.....”

The cry in the message belonged to Riko Asami.

Now that I thought about it, Miyazaki had never once referred to his sibling as his younger brother. I had just assumed my foe was male, since “Riko Asami” always spoke in a boy’s voice—my voice—and went by the name “Yuhei Ishihara.” Of course, Miyazaki intentionally never corrected me by mentioning a sister.

I never in my wildest dreams would have guessed that Asami and Miyazaki were related. Their last names are different, and there haven’t been any rumors to that effect going around school. Even though she would come into classroom 2-3 pretty much every day, I never saw anything that would make me suspect, either. If I had to guess, I’d say their messy family situation convinced them to keep the fact they’re brother and sister a secret.

In all likelihood, Asami wasn’t coming to our classroom to see just Maria, but Miyazaki, too.

“Maria, when did you realize ‘Yuhei Ishihara’ was female?”

“Good question. My suspicions to that effect became much stronger when we went into the girls’ bathroom together.”

“.....She went to the girls’ room in my body?”

“Why’re you asking a question you already know the answer to?” She sounds exasperated...but in this case, shouldn’t I be the one getting upset? “I finally figured out who she really was when I started asking around later. Miyazaki’s classmates from middle school all pretty much knew he and Asami were related by blood. I was sure she was the owner when I found the bodies at her home.”

So Maria saw the corpses, too...

“But where the heck is Asami, actually...?”

After discovering the owner’s identity by herself, Maria had apparently spent most of Saturday searching for Asami, but she hadn’t had any luck finding her as of yet.

Maria stoops down and reaches under her bed, and I hear a soft *rip* like she’s peeling something off.

“What’re you doing?”

“I set up an IC recorder under my bed. I had a feeling that if I left ‘Riko Asami’ here by herself, she might call Miyazaki or somebody and reveal some info she’s been hiding from us.”

Maria pulls out the recorder and presses play. She fast-forwards a few times as she searches for a section where our captive is speaking.

“.....*Hello?*” a voice says.

“...She called!”

“Yeah.”

We can’t hear the voice of the caller very clearly, but it probably belongs to a girl. We can tell it’s not Miyazaki, at least. I snatch my phone from the table and scroll through the call history. She must have erased both the incoming and outgoing calls, because I can’t find anything new.

I’m not certain, but it sounds like the voices on the recording are arguing.

Maria hooks the recorder up to her laptop, transfers the data over to it, and begins listening to it again on her headphones. She must be trying to hear everything she possibly can.

Her face grows so intense that it almost frightens me.

After a while, she takes off the headphones and hands them to me. I nod and put them on.

“*Hello...? Who is this?*”

“*Riko Asami.*”

I can’t believe my ears when she says that name.

After listening for a bit, a question forms in my mind. Is this really her? She doesn't talk like the Asami I know at all. She never mumbled so quietly like this. The girl I know has a personality more like that of "Yuhei Ishihara"—or I should say "Riko Asami."

Now that I think about it, Asami has been acting a bit weird since the thirtieth. Yeah, she seemed darker than usual. It wasn't the fact that Maria made me a bento that was making her behave strangely, though. Not really. Thinking back on it, the Week in the Mud would've already been underway by that point.

Asami had simply been trying to act like her old self... But why?

"Don't get any ideas that you're gonna make it out of this somehow, okay, 'Riko Asami'?"

I tune in and concentrate on the rest of the conversation.

May 4 (Monday), 11:02 AM

I reflect on my phone call with Riko Asami.

"Don't get any ideas that you're gonna make it out of this somehow, okay, 'Riko Asami'?"

The sheer malice in her voice caught me off guard at first, but I soon recovered and fought back.

"...And just how do you think you're gonna get the Box out? Do you even have a clue of what you need to do?"

"I don't. But I can still destroy it," she retorts effortlessly, and I've got nothing. "I want to escape. And I want to erase you, because I hate you. There's something I can do that will fulfill both those goals at the same time. I'm sure you know what I mean. Before the Box fulfills its mission..."

I have to strain to hear her clearly as she finishes.

"...all I have to do is kill myself."

I remember someone once said something similar.

Oh, right. That's what I said to Kazuki Hoshino once.

“Uh-oh, were you thinking that even if worse came to worst, you’d still get to keep Kazuki Hoshino’s body? Too bad for you, but that’s impossible. No, achieving victory over somebody or seizing happiness will never be realities for you. You’re still me, after all. You’re Riko Asami. I really wish you would remember that. Just die. You need to die.”

She begins mumbling a curse under her breath in a barely audible voice, much like the old Riko Asami used to.

“.....I hope you hang yourself and die and leave a smelly corpse covered in shit. I hope you jump off a roof and die and leave a mess of brains for the passersby. I hope you jump in front of a train and die and splatter your organs all over the platform so that it pisses off the other passengers... It would be perfect for you. So what do you think?” she asks. *“Which of those deaths would you prefer for Riko Asami?”*

How would she die?

I get it now. If Riko Asami, the owner, dies, then as an inevitable result, I’ll cease to exist, too.

She has me completely up against a wall now.

“.....Don’t.”

My short response shows how horribly overwhelmed I am while leaving her positively gleeful.

“Don’t what? Kill myself? Why not? Weren’t you the one who tried to off me first?”

“Th-that...was only because I didn’t realize I would disappear if you died.”

“Hee-ha-ha, are you serious? You thought you would somehow still be here? Wow. Oh, that is rich... Don’t tell me you’re seriously thinking you can become Kazuki Hoshino, too?”

“I can! As long as you don’t interfere! And then his happiness will be mine!”

“Oh. Well, it doesn’t really matter, I guess. I’m just gonna kill myself, anyway.”

“I’m telling you, don’t do it!”

“And why in the hell should I listen to anything you have to say? I’m your enemy, after all.”

“Enemy...?”

“Yeah, your enemy. You of all people should know that you’re your own worst enemy, especially when it comes to your past self.”

“Shut up! Why do you always have to be like that?! I could become Kazuki Hoshino if it weren’t for you! I hate you! *I hate you!!!*”

I can hear Riko Asami giggling in amusement at my raving.

“What’re you laughing at?!”

“You said you hate me.” Still chuckling, Riko Asami continues, *“Maybe you should take it easy on the self-loathing.”*

And that was my conversation with Riko Asami.

“H-hurk...”

I clutch my abdomen as a wave of nausea hits me.

I feel awful. Why, why...did I have to speak with her...? Was Ryu Miyazaki lying when he said he killed her?

“.....She’s going to kill me.”

It’s not a bluff. I say that because I know Riko Asami better than anyone. Someone like her, who hates herself more than anyone, will never allow the Box to complete its work.

My guess is that she’ll destroy it on the night of the fifth.

She’s going to drag it out to the bitter end and ensure my psychological torture goes on for as long as possible.

I had thought I needed to kill Riko Asami to avoid this very situation... But as it turns out, even if Ryu Miyazaki had actually offed her, it would have destroyed the Box and wiped me from existence as well.

So what is there for me? Am I doomed to oblivion no matter what I do?

“.....Oh, *Riko*, what are you gonna do...?”

.....Wait. I think back over my mutterings. What did I just say?

Riko?

I thought I gave up that name when I got this body. Naturally, I stopped using it.

No, it can't be—am I starting to accept it?

Am I starting to accept that I am “Riko Asami”?

No...no, no, no, no, no, no! I am *not* “Riko Asami”!! I am a nobody, a fabrication, and soon, I will be Kazuki Hoshino.....!!

“You think you can escape your actions so easily—that childish nature of yours is so adorable, I can hardly stand it.”

What is that voice?

The voice resonating in my body is tremendously charming, and I swear I've heard it somewhere before.

No. That's not gonna happen. I...can escape from Riko Asami.

Even so...

“Ah...aaahhhhh!!!”

A massive flood of memories replays through my mind all at once. These recollections should have vanished when I forced my way into this body. There's no way I can possibly process so much information at once, but they keep playing in my mind despite my protests.

The first thing I see are images of the first time Yuhei Ishihara got violent with Riko Asami.

The thirteen-year-old girl sobs and cowers in fear of that red-faced beast.

Yes, I remember. That's how it was in the beginning. At first, the beatings were a punishment for Riko Asami's bursts of temper. As a young teenager, she had possessed a visceral hatred for this man who wasn't her father. She had treated him as an enemy and acted hostile toward him. Unable to bear it any longer, Yuhei Ishihara eventually lashed out at her physically.

That was when the daily violence began. With just one thrashing, the problem

child who he didn't love would become quiet and obedient, so maybe it was only natural that things progressed in such a way. In that monster's eyes, pummeling Riko Asami was effective, even pleasant.

Her mother had also reached her wit's end with her daughter's disagreeable behavior, so she took relief in the beatings, too. Riko Asami's acting out had been an attempt to destroy her household. The problem had been a real headache for the old bitch.

They say a person's morals adapt to suit their surroundings. An aversion to the violence inflicted on Riko Asami once existed in this household, but it was worn away over time. Eventually, no one questioned the cruelty, not even its victim.

But while no one questioned it, the beatings slowly but surely tore away pieces of her heart. Over and over, she heard it happen. It wasn't a loud sound, but more of a gentle one, like a pebble dropping into a pond. Each time she heard it, she generally brushed it off, thinking *Well, there goes another piece*, but after a while, she noticed that several important parts of her had gone missing.

Put into words, the violence of that man, who put even monsters to shame, would surely seem unexceptional and be of little interest to third parties. They'd merely slap a label like "abuse" on it. Just knowing the terms would make people think they understood.

That was why Riko Asami never put a name to the violence.

The brutality had come to dwell in the gaps of Riko Asami's heart and replace what she had lost. Loving herself would mean accepting it, too.

And so Riko Asami never accepted her existence.

The next thing I see are images from Riko Asami's high school entrance ceremony.

There she—Maria Otonashi—was, standing at the podium as the head of her class.

A single look was enough to overwhelm Riko Asami. The sight of her, the sound of her voice, made it so hard to breathe that she had to sit down from

the discomfort.

She was, in a word, art.

The pinnacle of creation.

She was like a masterpiece crafted over the course of a lifetime by an artisan. She had such a sense of purpose, so much direction. She was an incomprehensible existence—a work of art.

Riko Asami didn't even notice the tears pouring from her eyes.

That was it. The only way to escape from herself. The only way was to purposefully construct an idealized false self that was just like Maria.

Riko Asami began the process of dismantling herself. She cast aside her melancholy aura and designed a new self that was androgynous and strong. But Maria Otonashi did it far better. The more Riko Asami learned about her, the more she was confronted by the reality that copying her simply wasn't possible. What allowed Maria to build an ideal self was the fact that she wasn't normal. That wasn't something another person could imitate.

Maria Otonashi...could not be human.

The final thing I see are images from April 28.

This was the day Riko Asami received the Box.

She was holding a well-worn rabbit plushie in her hands. Her older brother had won it for her from a crane game long ago, but now it was missing an ear and had blood on it.

And there were two corpses.

Her older brother was screaming silently in a puddle of red.

Yuhei Ishihara had completely broken Riko Asami.

There was nothing in that house that wasn't in pieces.

Everything had come to an end. All that once constituted Riko Asami had been trampled down and utterly destroyed.

I'm crying.

The illusions before my eyes finally disappear—maybe the tears washed them away.

“...I can’t... I can’t...”

I can’t accept this. I will never accept that I am Riko Asami!

“...That’s why...”

That’s why I will become Kazuki Hoshino.

“Kazuki Hoshino” disgusts me. I can’t stand him and his stupid belief that a normal life is happiness, or any of the others who don’t even know they can laugh and smile only because they are stealing someone else’s joy.

Well, I will make sure he knows. I’ll make sure “Kazuki Hoshino,” who doesn’t even try to comprehend my misery, knows.

I’ll use him. Maria Otonashi won’t confuse me for “Kazuki Hoshino” anymore. Trickery won’t work on her at this point in the game. That’s why I have to bring out the genuine article. I’ll threaten him, force him to obey me, and then deceive her.

I want his own actions to steer him down the road to oblivion and fill him with despair. He’ll never be happy with his life again.

I pull out Kazuki Hoshino’s phone and record a memo for him.

“‘Kazuki Hoshino,’ I’m gonna murder your entire family. I’ll butcher them in the most merciless ways possible. Their deaths will be hideous. I’ll dissect them so thoroughly that you won’t even be able to tell which corpse is whose. That’s why you need to do what I say. If you do, then maybe I’ll spare them. If I feel like it. You also absolutely must not let Maria Otonashi hear this recording. Now, here are your instructions...”

May 4 (Monday), 12:06 PM

“...I’m gonna kill you. I’m gonna kill you and become Kazuki Hoshino. And one more time, for the record—don’t tell Maria Otonashi about anything you’ve just heard.”

“...The fool,” Maria mutters, scowling after listening to the message. “She’s so desperate that it’s like she doesn’t even know what’s happening anymore.

There's no way I wouldn't listen to this message the way things are now."

In the most vulgar, almost unlistenable terms possible, the message had told me to *"Deceive Maria Otonashi and get me free of these bindings."*

Her threats don't frighten me. Now that Maria and I are on the same side, it's impossible for "Riko Asami" to carry out any murder in my body, no matter how she tries to coerce me. Sinking this low is more pathetic than anything else.

I can tell from the grim line of Maria's mouth that she probably feels the same way.

Maria spent yesterday and the day before learning as much as she could about Riko Asami. While the things she had heard were nothing more than rumors, they painted a horrible picture.

And then of course...there was the undeniable truth of those dead bodies, those irreversible mistakes. She had reached the point where the Week in the Mud was her only chance at hope for the future.

That's why Asami has reached the end of her rope.

".....Huh?"

"What's got you so confused all of a sudden?"

"...Well, I just kinda am, is all. Um, so Asami and 'Riko Asami' were talking to each other, so that means the owner is Asami, and the 'Riko Asami' inside my body is a separate being, right? ...Is that even possible?"

"What it comes down to is that Asami is a person who operates on common sense and deals in half measures. She could have seen that possessing you is plausible but couldn't fully believe in the idea of actually entering someone else's body. That's why things ended up how they are now."

"...So the owner is the real Asami?"

"She's neither real nor fake. But she will continue to exist and suffer as before, regardless of whether 'Riko Asami' was ever created by the Week in the Mud."

So Asami was unable to escape her misery even after obtaining the Week in the Mud. Now that she's been left behind, she plans to kill herself and take

“Riko Asami” with her.

“We have to prevent this suicide at all costs, but to do that, we need to find Asami. Where in the hell could she be? ...Damn, we have less than a day and a half!”

Maria is visibly distressed. No one places others before themselves more than she does. If Asami dies, it will put an end to the Week in the Mud, but Maria refuses to let it come to that.

“.....Maria, how about if we try to use this threat to our advantage?”

She reacts to my idea with doubt. “What do you mean?”

“...Sorry, it’s just that I was thinking that if we intentionally go along with her demands and let ‘Riko Asami’ loose in my body, it might help us break out of the deadlock...”

“True, we aren’t getting anywhere at this rate.” Maria folds her arms in contemplation. “So we do as she asks and set ‘Riko Asami’ free. And then... Yes. It’s just a possibility, but she might try to meet up with Miyazaki.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

“Wait. Is it possible Miyazaki knew where Asami was this entire time?”

“...My guess is probably not. If he did, he would never help make sure the Week in the Mud is a success.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right... But if that’s the case, he has no basis for his confidence that we’ll never find her... Do you think Miyazaki is mistaken about something...?” Maria scowls and thinks for a moment. “...This isn’t an answer we can find merely by puzzling over it in our heads. For the time being, I can’t come up with a reason not to see if Miyazaki is truly unaware of Asami’s current whereabouts.”

I nod in agreement.

Maria continued, “So is there any point to freeing ‘Riko Asami’ at all? The one we need is Asami the owner, not ‘Riko Asami.’”

“...Um, actually, I think there is. Judging by what we heard on the recorder, I think we can assume that ‘Riko Asami’ knows how to get in contact with Asami

the owner.”

“You’re saying we work with the one possessing you and let her contact Asami? That won’t work. If she’s making threats this extreme, I can’t imagine she’ll go along with any requests from us.”

...She’s probably right.

“Or are you suggesting that you think you can bend her to your will, break her spirit, and force her to go along with our plans?” Maria jokes with a light chuckle.

I answer her facetious question. *“Actually, I am.”*

Her face freezes.

To be honest, I’m just as surprised at the cold strength in my words as she is.

But while I may be surprised at myself, I have a plan. As someone in a similar situation to “Riko Asami,” I know how to manipulate her into doing what we want.

Once we set “Riko Asami” free, she’ll get in touch with Miyazaki. He means as much to her as Maria means to me.

And this is why...

“We’ll get Miyazaki to betray ‘Riko Asami.’”

Even as the words leave my mouth, I wonder: *Can I really pull this off?*

I intend to drag Miyazaki back into this, fill “Riko Asami” with despair, and destroy the Week in the Mud. As a result, my schoolmate will return to her old self and the results of her irreversible actions. I can’t see a happy future ahead for her after that. Essentially, I’m sacrificing her.

.....Time to quit acting like I’m a good person who’s conflicted over which path to choose.

The truth is, I’ve known what I was going to do since the very beginning. I made that choice the moment I declared I wouldn’t stand for her existence, as soon as I acknowledged her as my enemy.

I will defeat her. I won’t accept what she has done.

Maria regards me and my resolution with a long face.

“I...”

“...Can’t help with this?”

“No...that’s not it. If I don’t help, you will be lost, so I know I have no other choice. I just can’t accept that inevitable misery awaits Asami,” she says, worried and biting her lip.

“You can’t stand to see other people unhappy, I know...”

“...That’s not all. If it were, I might be able to bear it to an extent. There’s something else I noticed.” Maria lowers her gaze. “‘Riko Asami’ is the same as ‘Aya Otonashi.’”

“...The same?” I ask.

“...”

Maria doesn’t respond, but her silence helps me understand even better than words would have.

She tried to become a Box, and she still exists with “Aya Otonashi” as a part of her. “Riko Asami” used a Box and exists within me. They’re both similar, separated from their original selves.

Given Maria’s claim that they’re alike, I’m sure she understands almost too well how Asami feels.

I don’t know what to do. All I can try is sharing what I do know with Maria as she broods.

“But that isn’t what Asami wants,” I tell her. “She doesn’t want to disappear.”

“.....Yeah, I know.”

And with that, Maria lifts her gaze again.

There’s nothing we can do to change what the future holds for Asami.

May 4 (Monday), 12:35 PM

I stand in front of the door to Miyazaki’s apartment and take a deep breath.

Maria is already hiding in the room next to his. She apparently learned it was

vacant the last time she came here.

I exhale once and then ring the doorbell for Miyazaki's apartment.

Just as I expected, he doesn't answer.

I'm still certain, though. I know he's inside.

"Come out." I try knocking. "C'mon, answer the door...!"

I wonder how much what I'm about to do is going to hurt Miyazaki. I know it will, but I keep at it all the same.

"Open up...*Ryu*." I call him by the same name I heard Riko Asami use on the phone. "Help me, Ryu."

Miyazaki has probably decided to have nothing to do with "Riko Asami" and hole up in there until the sixth. He won't be able to ignore her if she comes to him for help, though.

That's why the door to the apartment opens. His complexion is even worse than yesterday.

".....Is Otonashi nearby?"

"No."

"...Where have you been?"

"Maria Otonashi captured me...but I was able to trick 'Kazuki Hoshino' into helping me escape. What about you? Why haven't you answered any of my calls?"

"...It's just... More importantly, why are you calling me 'Ryu' now? I thought you decided to stop doing that."

"Well..."

Asami may have called him "Ryu" during that phone call, but she must not be calling him that now. I fight down the urge to panic and quickly use the excuse I prepared.

"Maria Otonashi is already calling me 'Riko Asami,' so I thought I might as well call you 'Ryu' now... Back on topic, though, how did I get caught? What should I do now?"

I hit him with more questions before he has time to think too hard about my excuse. He falls quiet after the rapid-fire demands, biting his lip in thought. The reaction convinces me that he's buying my act.

"Are you going to keep helping me, Ryu?"

It pains me to see the suffering twisting his face. I want him to say he won't help "Riko Asami" any longer. I want him to declare that he'll plan to help us instead. If he does, we won't have to hurt him any further.

"Yeah, I'll keep helping you." Unfortunately, Miyazaki gives his assent, forcing a weak smile.

It's time for me to move on to the next step in the plan. "You will? I really wish you wouldn't."

Miyazaki's eyes go round in confusion at the sudden shift. ".....Huh?"

"I said, I really wish you'd stop helping 'Riko Asami.'"

Even now, he's silent and unable to fully grasp what's happening.

I decide to give him a hint. "I'm 'Kazuki Hoshino.'"

"Hoshino...?"

Miyazaki mutters my name back to me. He stands dazed for a moment longer, but eventually, his eyes fill with knifelike rage. He seizes me by the throat as he realizes the "Riko Asami" he was talking to was only a performance courtesy of "Kazuki Hoshino." "What the hell do you think you're doing, you bastard?! Do you enjoy toying with me?! Do you have any idea how despicable that was?!"

"...I do."

"Then why did you do it?! Tell me!!"

I start to open my mouth, but I hesitate. Everything I've planned to say will hurt Miyazaki. "If all you want is to save 'Riko Asami,' then you're instinctively going to assist her. Remember what Maria said? You aren't choosing anything when you do that."

The sharp glare remains in his eyes, but his grip on my collar loosens a bit.

".....I thought I told you. All I want to do is help my little sister."

“And you were going to just now, weren’t you? *Only, the person who asked you for help was me, not her.*”

Miyazaki’s eyes widen.

“C’mon, Miyazaki. You can’t even tell us apart. Is a being you hardly understand that important to you?”

Though I’m sure he wants to hit back at such a hurtful remark, he bites down on his lip hard enough to turn it white.

“If it were your sister, I’d tell you to go ahead and help her. I wouldn’t try to stop you. But ‘Riko Asami’ is not your little sister. So c’mon, Miyazaki. Why don’t you say it for me one more time—”

I land the finishing blow.

“—*who would you be helping?*”

He glowers at me, but I give as good as I get.

“.....Damn you!!”

With a yell, Miyazaki angrily releases my collar.

He balls his fists, ready to punch me and release his directionless rage...but then he stops and slumps in exhaustion.

“.....Do whatever you want.” He sounds sad. “Just do what needs to be done. If you want to put an end to the Week in the Mud, do whatever it takes, and do it far away from me. I don’t want to be involved. I won’t be a part of this anymore.”

“I’m afraid...*that’s not good enough.*”

Miyazaki’s head snaps up. “...What do you mean, ‘not good enough’?!”

“I mean exactly what I said. Your decision, your resolve, it’s not enough. *I need you to actively help destroy the Week in the Mud.*”

His features contort in anger. “You... Do you have any idea what you’re saying?! You’re asking me to help you hurt her!”

“I suppose I am.”

“Don’t be an idiot! I could never do that!! I won’t get in the way... Even you have to understand that’s the most I can promise!”

“Oh, I know. I know you were about to help her a moment ago.”

“.....”

“That’s why I’m saying it’s not good enough. If your resolve is that weak, then nothing will change from the way it was before. You know she’s going to come to you for help from here on out. If you reach out to her then, you’re throwing your lot in with the Week in the Mud, too.”

Miyazaki looks away and mutters, “All the same...it’s not like I can abandon her.”

“It doesn’t matter. You still have to choose. ‘Riko Asami’ will be here soon.”

“.....What?”

“‘Riko Asami’ threatened me and demanded that I help her escape from Maria. I decided to act like I was going along with it. Since she’ll think her bullying worked, I guarantee she’ll come to you next.”

“.....So the next switch is at one PM?”

“Yeah. You have until then to decide how you’re going to handle things. If you help ‘Riko Asami,’ then the Box will fulfill its purpose, and only that personality who wasn’t even anyone to begin with will remain. If you rebuff her, we’ll help you get your real sister back.”

“You’re saying I should believe you two? Ha-ha... This is the dumbest deal I’ve ever heard.”

“So you’re fine with things the way they are?”

Miyazaki clenches his hands into fists. “...Of course I’m not. You don’t have to tell me for me to know. It’s just...I could never turn her away...”

Even after everything I’ve said, Miyazaki can’t bring himself to make a decision.

This isn’t good. We need him to reject the one inside me. We have to make her feel hopeless. That’s why I decide to play my last card.

“You know, there’s something I find strange. Why do you believe the Week in the Mud is real? I mean, the only ones who would believe that ‘Riko Asami’ is inside me would be people who’ve received a Box before, don’t you think?”

Miyazaki raises his face and turns back to me, staring.

“Explain it to me. How did you come to believe in something so unreal?”

“...What’re you trying to say?”

“Can’t come up with the answer? Well, let me tell you. I can imagine only one reason why someone would ever believe in Boxes. So let me ask you, Miyazaki...”

I didn’t tell even Maria that I was going to say this.

“You’ve met O, haven’t you?”

Miyazaki’s features freeze in place.

“I don’t know how exactly you interacted with him. But I’m almost certain that O wanted you to help ‘Riko Asami.’”

“.....”

His mute surprise gradually shifts to a pallid, fearful expression.

The name “O” alone probably isn’t enough for him to understand what I mean right away. In most cases, only the current owner is conscious of O’s existence. Miyazaki gains that awareness for the first time as I say their name.

And then he remembers what was done to him.

“...Ah!” Miyazaki clutches his head, eyes still wide.

“I’m familiar with O, so I know what you’re going through. There’s no way anyone ever forgets them. It’s just that they can’t be remembered by normal means. You may not be able to recall at will what O did to you, *but that knowledge is still buried below your subconscious*. That’s how you were able to believe in the Box. After that, they manipulated you into believing you had to help ‘Riko Asami.’”

“.....S-slow down. That... How do you know all this, Hoshino?!” He looks up at me, voice trembling in obvious fear.

“I mean, I don’t know it for certain. But I do know that if you don’t help ‘Riko Asami,’ O won’t be able to fulfill their objective.”

“Objective...? What objective...?”

“What O is after is to observe me... I guess that doesn’t make much sense to you, but that’s what it is. This Box is fascinating when it comes to studying me, but it’s weak. It puts ‘Riko Asami’ at a tremendous disadvantage. It has to be horrible for her to be stuck in another person’s body while still retaining her sense of self. To even stand a fighting chance, ‘Riko Asami’ needs information from the times when she’s not controlling the body. *If O didn’t do something to level the playing field between us, the Box would simply get destroyed without any intrigue.* That’s why O used you to balance the scales.”

Miyazaki lowers his head as my words sink in. He’s motionless.

“...I’ve said all I can say.”

This is the final spell ensnaring Miyazaki, a curse woven into the depths of his mind to persuade him that he must protect the Box. Once exposed for what it is, its effects should come undone.

“Well, I’d better go. It’s almost one. What you do when she comes calling is up to you. ‘I’ won’t be there, so I can’t stop you two.”

“.....I’m going to help her. I’ve told you that.”

I don’t say anything in response—Miyazaki’s simply trying not to acknowledge his defeat, I know—and close the door without even glancing at his expression.

“.....”

I head for the stairs. Although I can hear footsteps approaching from the apartment next door, I don’t turn toward them.

“You... Why didn’t you tell me O had interfered with him?!”

I wasn’t trying to hide it from her. I realized it myself only just before arriving here, and there wasn’t time to tell her.

“Why aren’t you saying anythi—? Kazuki?”

Her anger is comforting, though, and I rest my head on Maria’s shoulder. I am

the nemesis of “Riko Asami.” I must break her, even if it means using Miyazaki to do so.

I have to. There’s no other choice. But still.....

“Hurting others is really hard.” I mumble the obvious under my breath, unable to lift my head.

Nevertheless, I’ve set myself on course to take my life back.

Now, I’m the kind of person who will sacrifice another for my own sake. I want somebody to rake me over the coals and tell me how horrible I am.

But for some reason, Maria does no such thing.

Instead, out of all the things she could have done, she gently rubs my head.

“.....”

Why?

Why is it so comforting, even though it’s the exact opposite of what I wanted?

May 4 (Monday), 1:00 PM

That peppermint smell is gone. I’m in a convenience store, holding a weekly manga magazine like I was once before. I managed to escape from Maria Otonashi’s apartment.

“Ah-ha!”

It worked. My threat worked!

My trapped desperation is gone in an instant. It’ll be okay. I’ve still got a fighting chance. First, I need to see Ryu Miyazaki.

I leave the store and figure out where I am—a major street I’m familiar with. It’s not too far from Ryu Miyazaki’s place.

I go to his apartment and ring the doorbell. He answers right away.

His face is a sickly shade of white. The circles beneath his glasses are even darker than before. He’s not saying anything, either, just standing there and quietly taking me in.

“...What... What happened to you?”

“.....It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

His denial makes it clear it wasn’t “nothing.” “Did Maria Otonashi do something to you?”

“No... Nothing happened.”

His response is monotone, almost mechanical. There’s obviously something wrong with him. Well, you could say there was always something wrong with him, but this is even worse than usual.

“Anyway, how about you come inside?” he asks dully, and I follow him in despite my suspicions.

“...What the heck?” The first thing I see once I’m in the apartment is a broken window.

“Oh, Otonashi did that.”

My brother sounds as if he couldn’t care less. She must have done something to him. That’s the only explanation I can come up with.

“...So the plan yesterday failed.”

“Yeah.”

So vague... Just what happened to him? “Why didn’t you answer when your sister called?”

“...*Sister*, huh?”

“What?”

“I thought you stopped referring to yourself as my sister.”

...He’s right. I need to stop doing that.

“...Just a little mistake. I’m no one, after all.”

“.....It’s after one,” he says with a distant look in his eyes.

“Yeah, but why are you suddenly...?”

“It was you at this time on the third, too, so it has to be you now. That’s how I know. But if it were after two...I’d probably doubt myself and think you were

Hoshino trying to trick me again. I can't read subtle expressions like Maria Otonashi."

".....What on earth are you even talking about?"

"Hey, what do you call me?"

"Huh? Well, I've called you 'Ryu Miyazaki' plenty of times."

"Yeah, that's right. That's true."

"Quit acting so weird and fill me in on yesterday."

"Okay." With a nod, he sits down at his desk and starts staring into the blank monitor of his computer. "I put the plan into action. As you can see, it failed."

Expecting more, I wait as he sits perfectly still, peering into the depths of the screen. But he never starts talking again. "Huh? Is that it...?"

"I don't know anything more than that. My plan didn't work, and I have no way of knowing what happened after Maria Otonashi took him away. I don't know what changed between them."

".....What the hell. That doesn't tell me anything at all."

"I guess not." His tone is cold, and he still isn't making any attempt to look at me.

".....Are you abandoning me?"

Not even that quiet question is enough to make him turn my way.

Oh, I see. That's what he's doing. He thinks everything will be fine if he just plugs his ears and ignores it.

"You're having regrets, aren't you?"

That finally gets his attention.

"You wish you hadn't gotten so deeply involved, don't you? You wish you'd never discovered Riko Asami's misery when you came running at her plea for help. I know you do. If you had just remained unaware, you'd still be living in your own little bubble, moaning about how unhappy you are. If only you had ignored that phone call....."

“I—I don’t regret any of that.” Ryu Miyazaki interrupts me. “The only regret I have is that I didn’t notice how things would end up. If I had, I’m sure I could’ve done something to keep it from coming to this. What I did is entirely my fault, from beginning to end. I never want to make a mistake like that again.”

His eyes land on me.

“That’s why I’ve decided to keep helping Riko. I’ve decided that will never change, no matter what anyone says.”

“.....*Ryu.*” A warmth fills my chest. I know without a shadow of a doubt that my brother means those words. “Thank you, Ryu... And I do still need your help.”

“Ryu, eh?” he answers quietly. “Hey... Tell me what it is you hope to accomplish.”

“Why now...? Fine. My goal is to gain control of Kazuki Hoshino. To do that, I need to crush the will of ‘Kazuki Hoshino.’ I want him to suffer enough to want to rip off his own head. I want to crush him so thoroughly that he offers his body to me on bended knee and begs me to take it.”

“...Okay, and you’re absolutely sure that’s what you want?”

“Of course. How many times have I told you that?”

Mumbling “I see, okay” under his breath over and over, my brother lowers his head and eventually falls silent. Something doesn’t seem right, so I examine his face.

“.....Huh?”

He’s crying. My brother is crying.

“R-Ryu, what’s with the tears?”

As if he didn’t notice until I mentioned it, he swipes at his cheek in surprise and realizes what he was doing, then roughly rubs his entire face with his arm.

When was the last time I saw my brother cry? Probably not since he discovered our parents’ deception. After that, there were no more tears from him. He hid all signs of weakness from others so that he could struggle with whatever invisible demons were plaguing him.

But now, he's weeping.

".....I'll...help," he states softly. "That's my decision. I decided to help my sister. Riko was so weak, and I was too consumed with my own problems to do anything for her before, but I swore this time I would be there for her. I swore. I'd help her, I said—I'd help her, I'd help her, I'd help her, I'd help her, I'd help her, I'd help her, I promised, but...but..."

He raises his head and looks at me.

".....*Who are you?*"

I can't breathe.

"The one I decided to help was Riko. But...who're you? Tell me, who are you?!"

"...Wh-what're you saying, Ryu?! I'm..."

"No one. You said it yourself, right?"

...I did. I did say that.

"That's right. There's no way you could be Riko Asami. If you were Riko, why would you be trying to be Kazuki Hoshino? And you aren't Kazuki Hoshino, either. Then who does that make you? Tell me... Why should I go to bat for someone if I can't even tell who they are? There's no reason in hell!!"

No.

I understand. This isn't how my brother really feels.

"To me, you're no more than a poor imitation of my sister! I can't even tell you apart from 'Kazuki Hoshino'!"

This is simply meant to break my heart.

And to break his own.

"R-Ryu..."

"Don't call me that." He's saying this to suppress his feelings. *"I won't let some piece of filth I can't even recognize call me that!!"*

And in crushing his own heart...

“Aaaah...”

...he crushes his sister's, too.

My brother will not help me, because I'm not really his sister. Yes, that's right. I'm not Riko Asami. If not, then who am I? Kazuki Hoshino? No. I'm not Kazuki Hoshino yet. Wait...did I ever *really* want to be Kazuki Hoshino?

“Aaah...”

What is it that I really want?

To be honest, maybe I knew ever since I received the Box.

I remember the times from before our parents got divorced.

I always thought our family got along pretty well. We were the type who would often go shopping at the mall together on weekends, see movies together, go out for all-you-can-eat hot pot, those kinds of things. After he got home from work, my dad would barge into my room to say hi—I'd warn him to knock next time, but he'd never listen. My mom always made cute little arrangements out of my bento lunches. My older brother and I were always fighting, but that didn't stop us from playing together constantly.

We were a pretty happy crew, in my mind. I never doubted that we would always be together, just like other families.

Unfortunately, it was all a lie.

I don't mean everything fell apart at once, just that none of it was real to begin with.

I remember I was so scared of something my brother said when learned about the divorce:

“I'm glad. Now we don't have to try and act like some happy family anymore. We won't have to feel guilty anymore.”

I didn't know what he meant at first. But as time passed, everything started making sense. Why did our mother and father get along so well when they were together, even though they were getting divorced? All those smiles when they were kind to me were probably fake.

Everything was one big act meant to fool me, to delude me into believing I was living in a happy home. None of it was really for me, though. It was just a way of hiding their own shame.

That's how I came to realize that the only way to obtain the happiness I longed for was to take it from someone else.

But is happiness something that can be stolen?

So what *do* I want to do? I don't understand. I can't even process such a thing. I don't know. I don't want to know. Plus, I don't have the Box anymore.

I just want to run away. I have to escape.

I need to leave this room. I'll be fine as long as I go now. I can still run.

In my struggle to get out of there as fast as possible, I trip and fall. Realizing I can't even waste the time it takes to stand up, I scabble on my hands and knees down the hallway to the door.

For some reason, there's a pair of legs that could belong to a model.

I raise my head.

"Wh-why...?"

Standing there in front of me is Maria Otonashi.

But if she's here now... It can't be! I turn back toward my brother. He's sitting in the chair, head in his hands, refusing to acknowledge anything occurring around him. My brother knew she was close by. He decided to throw me to the wolves. He knew I would come here, and he was planning on turning me over to Maria Otonashi all along.

".....It was never going to work," she states flatly. "It's honestly impossible to throw away your identity. You can try, but who you are will always catch up to you in the end. You've known that from the get-go. This is as much as your Box's wish will ever get you. You will gain nothing from the Week in the Mud. The swamp will simply suck you in and pull you down to the bottom."

So says the object of my admiration to the one who utterly failed to be like her.

What does that make her? She threw away her old self, too, so does that mean she didn't gain anything, either?

I gaze up into her face. There's a touch of sadness in the way she's watching me.

I've gotta escape. But where to? There's nowhere for me to run in the apartment, and Maria Otonashi is right in front of the door. I'm on my knees, powerless. I don't have anywhere to go.

"I'm going to ask you something. I put this question to you before, but I want you to answer it again. Tell me..."

Here comes her question.

"...Who are you?"

But that's...

"Who...am I...?"

That's what I want to know, too. I don't know why at first, but she pulls out a phone and hands it to me as I fall back onto my rear.

"I'll tell you."

The voice belongs to "him," the one who never doubted himself, no matter how chaotic I made his existence.

"Kazuki Hoshino" answers the question for me.

"You're nobody, just another enemy who's only here to fall before me."

"No..."

That's not what I am.

I am not living for you! You think I'd ever let you define me?!

".....I am Riko Asami!!"

As I make that admission, I realize there's no turning back now. Now that I've admitted I'm Riko Asami, I have no hope of becoming Kazuki Hoshino. I can't even imagine it. All avenues of retreat have been cut off, and there's no escape for me any longer.

The instant it dawns on me.....

“AH, AAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaah!!”

The Box swells to an enormous size all at once. It rips through my veins like a bullet, wounding and maiming and tearing at every part of me—ahh, I can’t take it!! Stop, it hurts, stop, help me! I want it out of me, but I can’t get it out, can’t get it out, can’t get it out, can’t get it out. This body doesn’t have the Box in it. Why does it hurt so much? Stop, stop, please, just stop!!

“I get it... I get it now, so please, just stop...”

I understand now that I can never be anyone other than me.

I screwed up. I made the wrong wish with the Box. I can’t be in this body. All of this is pointless. I... I.....

“I wanted to be happy, that’s all.”

But that’s not possible.

The moment I took the first step down this blood-soaked path, there would never be any happiness for me.

I cling to her, the one who successfully remade herself, the one who claims to be a Box.

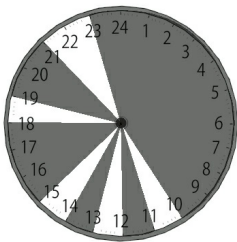
I won’t mess up anymore. I won’t make any more mistakes, so please...

“Help...me.”

May 4 (Monday), 2:00 PM

Strangely, I know right away my vision is blurry because of tears.

As I wipe them away, I see Maria in front of me, fighting down her emotions.



May 5 (Tuesday), Children's Day

May 5 (Tuesday), 2:10 AM

I'm dreaming.

It's the same dream as always.

I'm standing in front of corpses, playing with a rabbit plushie that's missing an ear. I stick my pointer finger into the hole where the torn-off ear would have been and start widening it.

I slide my finger in and stir it around. The rabbit's head changes shape. The cotton inside feels nice. Around and around and around, squish, squish, squish. One of the rabbit's eyes pops off. Cotton stuffing is spilling out of its torn face.

I look at my hands. Aside from the drying blood covering them, there shouldn't be anything unusual. But all I can see is a pair of pitch-black, rotting extremities.

My body is filled with sludge that consists of pure hatred. I want to slice my body open and drain it out.

"Well, well, this is quite the interesting little scene we have here."

"Eek!"

The sudden voice starts me so badly my heart almost leaps from my chest.

"Of all the incidents that could have occurred around that boy, this one is the ultimate perversion. Yes, this is fascinating indeed. The manner of your involvement in this incident is superb, and your feelings toward him also intrigue me."

I turn around and behold the owner of the voice behind me.

Their silhouette... Well, maybe it's because this is a dream. Something is blurring my vision, making it impossible to see them clearly. I can't even tell if they're a man or woman.

"Wh-who are you? H-how long have you been there...?"

Instead of answering my question, he (or is it she?) merely smiles.

I look over at my brother. He is still screaming silently, oblivious to the presence of this stranger.

Where is this? We should be in our house, but something's wrong. It doesn't feel real, more like we've been put inside a picture of it.

"You're very interesting, too, though not quite as much as that boy. I know in theory that humans become empty when they despise themselves, but it's electrifying to see it happen right in front of me. Yes, I can see no reason not to give you a Box."

They're completely ignoring my question and ranting about something I don't understand.

But there's one thing I do know: They are captivating. Unbelievably so.

"Do you have a wish?"

Of course I do. I'm always wishing for something.

"This Box can grant any desire," the stranger says in an enchanting voice, then hands me something that resembles a container. Now that I think about it, it does look like a box. Even though it's very close to me, I still can't see it clearly.

I try touching it.

That alone is enough to let me know it's real. The certainty isn't born of logic or anything similar; it's a conviction that permeates every fiber of my being.

I accept the Box.

"How do I use it...?"

"Just imagine your wish as clearly as you can. That's it. Humans have an innate power to make wishes come true, so this Box isn't actually anything that special. All it does is simplify a person's wish and make it easier to grant."

My wish. My wish is to not be Riko Asami. To become anyone other than the girl I despise so thoroughly.

Who should I become?

The first person who comes to mind is Maria Otonashi, the one I admire so

much. But that's not possible. She isn't human, after all. Something like me could never become her.

I suddenly know just the person.

"I'm going to make my wish."

He's a boy who cherishes his mundane everyday life as if it was the most natural thing in the world. A boy who for some unfathomable reason has made Maria Otonashi his.

He values his life? What a bunch of garbage. Let him have a taste of what I consider "normal" and see if he still thinks that. The way he gets to bask in happiness for no good reason disgusts me.

So hand it over!

"I want to *take the place of* Kazuki Hoshino."

As soon as my wish is made, the Box begins folding in on itself with loud slams. It becomes small and hard, then shoots with the force of a bullet straight through my eye and into me. Before I even have time to feel the pain, it's nestled inside my heart and threaded through my veins to take control of my entire body. I... I... I'm being torn apart, broken, dissected, torn asunder, controlled, manipulated by the Box.....and disappearing.

"So you want to take his place, do you? Heh-heh... You must be truly miserable." A charismatic smile spreads across their face. "*You must be truly miserable to understand it's just taking his place.*"

Why? Disappearing is all I've ever wanted.

"Empty people can only dream up empty wishes. I'm sorry, but I was well aware of that little bit of information." Their smile is tender and irresistible. "Oh, you are too precious. You think you can escape your actions so easily—that childish nature of yours is so adorable, I can hardly stand it."

And then my dream self is dumped into the muck.

As it swallows me, I can't even scream, let alone breathe.

I've been awake for a while now.

But like a puppet with severed strings, I can't move from atop Maria Otonashi's bed. I have to contact Riko Asami. Despite knowing this, I can't make myself move.

Maria Otonashi has been sitting in a chair watching me the whole time.

But even this isn't enough for me to move. I can't even look away from her steady, observant gaze.

She's the first to lose her will and break our little staring contest. She stands up and goes off somewhere.

After a moment, she returns and offers me a cup of coffee. I only stare at the steam rising in front of me. When I don't take the mug, she again backs down first, retracting her arm and taking a sip of her own offering. "That's bitter..." she comments. ".....Well, seeing as there isn't much to do at the moment, maybe I'll talk to myself for a bit."

She frowns into the mug as she speaks.

"I am a Box. And just like a Box, I can also grant wishes," she informs me, as if this really were a regular chat over coffee. "But I am a failure as one. The happiness I bestow is fictitious and false."

Her tone is bland, but her expression can't fully conceal her frustration.

"What is happiness, really? Does it come to you based on your mind-set? If so, then even someone responsible for the disappearance of their entire family should be able to change how they feel. Is that really all it takes to achieve happiness?"

I thought at first she was talking about me, but now I'm not so sure.

"...I...don't think that's possible. *I'm here now because I think that way.*"

Now I know for sure she's referring to herself.

"I don't know exactly what happened with you, but I don't think changing the way you think or your situation will make you happy. My guess is that you probably feel the same way. Am I right?"

She is. The only place I'm going is to hell, no matter what path I take.

"You asked me earlier to help you." She downs the coffee before continuing, "As long as you're fine with a failure like me, *I can grant your wish.*"

Under normal circumstances, I would assume she was trying to feed me an outrageous lie, but her face is the picture of sincerity.

Regardless of whether I believe her, it's enough.

".....Really?"

It's enough to make me speak again.

"Yeah. If the only roads before you lead to hell, then I'll offer you a different path. It may be a mere illusion, but for someone in your position, I'm sure that's more than enough."

If all she wanted was to dangle hope in front of my nose to get something from me, she wouldn't phrase it this way.

"Will you be okay after you use your otherworldly power...? Or will it be like in those manga where the hero has to pay a price for using their ability?"

Maria Otonashi stays silent for a moment.

"There is, isn't there?"

"...It's nothing for you to worry about."

"That just makes me even more worried."

After a weary sigh, she answers, "I lose a portion of my memory."

"What...?"

"When I use the Misbegotten Happiness, my memories of the recipient vanish, along with, to a certain extent, those of others involved with them. I actually have almost no memories at all. I can't recall my family or my friends. All that remains to me are the memories I willingly sought out."

"What? But why...?"

That sounds horrible.

".....Don't tell me that means you would forget Kazuki Hoshino if you used

your power on me...?”

She has no response to that. I’m sure it’s because I’m right.

“...I don’t understand. Why would you do that for me? Why would you be willing to forget someone so important to you...?”

“It’s my choice. Like I said, you don’t need to worry about it.”

“But—”

“You and I are the same.” She cuts me off. “That’s why I don’t want to see you miserable. I don’t think I could bear it. I would never have become a Box if I could sit by and watch that happen.”

Is that why she’s willing to lose such precious memories?

That’s crazy. Crazy, but...

It’s also why she was able to become the pinnacle of creation.

If it’ll allow me to escape from eternal suffering, and if she’s doing it willingly, then I’ll accept her offer.

“Let me use a phone.”

She nods and hands me Kazuki Hoshino’s. I spot my number in the outgoing call history. Maria must have called me.

But that’s not the way to reach the one I want. I tried calling that number before, too, but it never connected. The number *she* calls me from isn’t mine.

No, it belongs to Yuhei Ishihara.

I make the call. After a few rings...

“Hello?”

...Riko Asami answers the phone.

May 5 (Tuesday), 9:42 PM

When I fill in the paper Miyazaki gave me on the second, it looks like this:

12 AM – 1 AM	1 AM – 2 AM	11 PM – 12 AM	Day One
2 AM – 3 AM	3 AM – 4 AM	4 AM – 5 AM	Day Two
11 AM – 12 PM	1 PM – 2 PM	3 PM – 4 PM	Day Three
9 AM – 10 AM	4 PM – 5 PM	8 PM – 9 PM	Day Four
6 AM – 7 AM	8 AM – 9 AM	7 PM – 8 PM	Day Five
5 AM – 6 AM	7 AM – 8 AM	5 PM – 6 PM	Day Six
12 PM – 1 PM	2 PM – 3 PM	6 PM – 7 PM	Day Seven The End

The remaining three time blocks, 10 AM – 11 AM, 9 PM – 10 PM, and 10 PM – 11 PM, are all the time “Kazuki Hoshino” has left in this body. If we don’t somehow take care of the Week in the Mud within those hours, “Kazuki Hoshino” will have nothing left.

It’s 9:43 now. This means “Kazuki Hoshino” has only the final one hour and seventeen minutes remaining before eleven PM.

We have to do everything that needs to be done in that window, and we’ve finished all the preparations necessary to pull this off.

“Riko Asami” got in contact with Asami as requested. Asami agreed to meet, specifying a time and place.

And so, we come face-to-face with Riko Asami.

The meeting place Asami specified turns out to be our school. Though our school does have a security system, climbing over the gates isn’t enough to set it off.

It’s still Golden Week, so no one is here. We find her standing in the center of the empty schoolyard.

“Why do you think I decided to meet you?” she murmurs, like she’s talking to herself and not at all like the Asami I know. “I know what you hope to accomplish, after all. You’re here to stop me from killing myself and steal my Box, right? That’s something I don’t want to happen. But I still decided to meet you. Do you know why?”

Asami’s eyes are focused on some unknown point nearby.

“Because I wanted to see you one last time. I wanted to see the one I admire so much, who did what I couldn’t and created an ideal version of herself.”

“I don’t think so,” Maria forcefully interjects. “What you really want is for me

to stop you from doing something as stupid as throwing your life away.”

Riko Asami listens carefully to Maria’s words, and her mouth curves upward in a smile. “Sorry, but that tired argument won’t work on me. Ugh, what a disappointment... I didn’t want to hear those dull platitudes from you.”

“Hmph. So then why exactly did you come to meet us? Do you think I can’t see that you’re afraid to die?”

“You’re my insurance.”

“...Insurance?”

“I thought that if I got too scared to actually go through with it, you’d be kind enough to kill me instead,” she tells us matter-of-factly.

“ ...”

Why? Why is listening to this conversation so.....*annoying*?

I know there are certain emotions I should be feeling now. Panic, fright, sympathy—those would be more natural in this case. So why is it that all I’m feeling right now is irritation?

I think and think and think, and then it dawns on me.

.....No way.

“Asami.”

Only my subconscious could have led me to this fact. No wonder I’m pissed off. There’s no point to this idle *chitchat*.

“You met with Miyazaki after the Week in the Mud was set in motion, didn’t you?” I ask Asami abruptly, and she slowly nods. “He lied and told us the owner had died, to make us believe we had no chance of undoing the wish. He hoped to get us to give up and thus allow the Box to complete its purpose.”

“...And?” Asami prompts me.

I nod and continue. “Miyazaki was confident we would never be able to find you. But here you are, alive and well. Why would he be so sure of himself if that’s the case?”

Asami hesitates for a moment, then explains, “...When we met, I promised

him I would go into hiding. That's why—"

"Why?" I interrupt Asami midsentence. *"If Miyazaki was allied with 'Riko Asami,' the person trying hardest to help the Week in the Mud run its course, and you're prepared to take your own life to stop it, why would you need to collaborate with him?"*

She has nothing to say.

"It doesn't make any sense, don't you think?" I press.

"How would you know my mental conflicts?"

I've had it. This is gross, and I can't take it anymore.

"You are so creepy. Why're you talking like that? Cut it out already."

".....This is how I always used to talk. You wouldn't know it, but ever since middle school, I—"

"What I'm saying is you can drop the act. You're here in front of us now, so you wouldn't want to hide, right? So..."

"...stop talking like that, O."

Maria's eyes fly open wide as she gawks at Asami...or should I say, O.

All expression vanishes from Asami's face. She looks so mechanical that I can't sense any of the girl I knew in there.

"You've been keeping up this charade since the thirtieth, right? Even bad taste has its limits, you know. Thinking back on it, nothing has seemed right about her since then. Haruaki even commented on how weird she was acting, only to completely forget about it the next day. That's part of your nature—no one who isn't a Box owner can remember you. I guess you didn't visit our classroom, because Miyazaki was in there, huh?"

Asami listens to my theories silently, her face still a blank slate.

"Miyazaki was so confident about his big lie that Asami was dead because he knew you had possessed her body. If an inhuman being like you was walking around in her body and told him he would never see you again, my guess is he would probably take it to heart."

Not even that is enough to provoke a change in her expression.

“He might have forgotten about you, but it seems he couldn’t forget that something had possessed his sister. That’s why the only way out for Miyazaki was to make sure the Week in the Mud did what it was meant to do. That’s how you set him up as my enemy. You set the stage so that ‘Riko Asami’ and ‘I’ would be fighting on equal terms.”

I fix Asami with an angry glare as I continue.

“Then all that was left for you was to sit back and have your fun observing it all.”

The moment I finish speaking...

“Heh-heh.”

...the blank expression warps, and Riko Asami disappears entirely.

Well, the body is still hers. But there’s no longer any way of mistaking it. Riko Asami no longer exists behind those features. No human has an unfathomable grin like that.

“Well, well, I’m impressed.”

With that smile still in place, O claps their hands. The display is an expression of their confidence that they are perfectly safe, despite having been discovered.

“.....You seem to be enjoying yourself, O.”

Maria’s brows furrow as she jumps into the conversation.

“Enjoying myself? Heh-heh, why wouldn’t I be? This round of observations was truly worthwhile. Seeing how Kazuki Hoshino would react, how he would think, how he would suffer when his identity was taken from him has proven to be deeply intriguing. I never expected he would so clearly recognize ‘Riko Asami’ as an enemy and take action to bring her pain. Heh-heh, this experiment was rather short compared with the last one, but the results have been rich indeed.”

“Freak.”

Maria’s jeer has no effect on O’s mirthful expression. “Now then—*shall I give*

you this Box?"

I don't pick up on the meaning of those words right away.

What was that? O's going to give the Box to us? Why? We haven't even backed them into a corner or bargained for it...

".....What're you trying to pull?" Maria asks in my place.

"Oh? Is there something odd about my behavior?"

"Is this magnanimous attitude a facade to hide your desperation now that we've managed to sniff you out?"

"Your answer couldn't be more incorrect. What about this situation would imply I'm in peril? ...Hmm, it would appear you all misunderstand. My goal in this has been to observe Kazuki Hoshino, not interfere with your plans. This Box has given me my fill of fun with him, so I have already accomplished what I set out to do. Giving it to you now that I have no use for it is no problem at all."

Now I think about it, they're right. Ensuring the Week in the Mud would reach completion was never the point for O. Rather, if the Box actually does what it was made to do...

"Ah...!"

"Yes. I wasn't going to say anything, but it seems you've figured it out on your own. Heartbreaking."

They must be delighted to see the blood draining from my face. O is positively beaming.

"It's true—this Box you call the 'Week in the Mud' was never meant to fulfill its purpose from the very start. Riko Asami is a human of interest, but *not nearly enough so that I would sacrifice such a hard-earned guinea pig*. Let 'Riko Asami' take the place of 'Kazuki Hoshino'? Not on my watch."

O snickers.

"And so, when the time was right, I was planning to give you the Box regardless of whether you found me. There's nothing peculiar at all about my simply handing it over like this."

I made “Riko Asami” into my enemy to take myself back.

I wounded her and caused her suffering. I even made Miyazaki my accomplice. I went so far as to betray Maria, too.

But...

...even though I stooped so low...

“It was all for nothing, wasn’t it?”

Did O have me where they wanted from the very beginning? Was I simply dancing in the palm of their hand?

If so, then what does that make this whole week into...?

“It hasn’t been for nothing.”

A certain girl denies O’s claim, and I glance over toward her.

O turns their cheeky grin on Maria, too. “And just what do you mean by that?”

“Don’t you get it? Kazuki’s mission is to get back his normal life. Naturally, we did what we could to that end. So nothing would have changed. Even if Kazuki had managed to puzzle out that you never intended for the Week in the Mud to finish its work, it wouldn’t have changed his actions.”

“Again, how so?” O asks, thoroughly engrossed.

“That goes without saying,” Maria scoffs. *“There’s no reason he would place trust in your whims.”*

Ah, I see it now. O is giving me the box purely because it’s the most interesting thing for them, nothing more than a whim.

It would have been impossible for me to hope for that and not act on my own. Despite the chance that all my efforts would be in vain, I know for a fact that I still would have done everything in my power to put an end to this Box.

“I see. However, Kazuki is one thing, but you, I’m afraid, have truly labored to no avail. This Box cannot be used again.”

“You are hilariously simpleminded. Revealing yourself here to us now is a sign that I’ve made at least some progress. It proves that as long as I’m with Kazuki, I

will encounter you and your Boxes.”

“Hmm...?” O widens their eyes, almost deliberately. “Are you being serious?”

Maria’s reply sounds disappointed. “I’ve spent the equivalent of a lifetime hunting down Boxes. Why ask that now?”

“That’s not what I meant. Your foolishness doesn’t concern me in the slightest. I’m asking if there is some significance to proving that your proximity to Kazuki will allow you to encounter me.”

Maria’s eyes dilate at that, and her face slowly goes pale.

“So you didn’t notice...or to be more precise, you didn’t consider it deeply enough, I assume?” O smiles again. “Such proof is meaningless. *Besides, weren’t you planning on leaving Kazuki anyway?*”

Wh-what...?

“C-cut the crap!”

“Heh-heh, that deathly white complexion is all the proof you need to know I’m being truthful. Kazuki, I’ll have you know that she is planning on using her Box on ‘Riko Asami.’”

“Use the Misbegotten Happiness...?”

I’ve touched that Box, so I know. I’ve seen the depths of that sea, so I know. Maria must under no circumstances use her own Box. I may be generally clueless, but even I can tell that using the Box would be an irreversible act.

“If she does, she will lose all memory of you. And without those memories, there is little doubt she will leave your side.”

“Wh-why are you so sure of that?!”

“Simple. That’s what happens every time she uses it,” O says.

I turn toward Maria. Her nervous lip chewing is enough for me to know it’s true.

“Why would you think to use the Misbegotten Happiness...?”

“...I told you before. Asami’s suffering is inevitable, and I can’t just sit back and watch.”

Is she saying she would harm herself just for that...?

But yeah, I get it. She's always been like that. Maria would throw her own life away to save someone else. That's the type of person she is.

"I am a Box. I'm not human. I exist only to save others. Right, that's why I..."

Maria's ever-stern countenance returns, and she declares in a loud, clear voice:

"I can remain Aya Otonashi."

Yet, I can't help but think there's still a bit of Maria Otonashi in there, too.

"...Never let me out of your sight, either."

That was the real Maria, wasn't it? That was how she really feels, unable to bear the solitude.

This is all wrong. There's no way ignoring her own emotions is the correct choice.

But I can't just claim she's wrong. I have no idea what resolve has led her to this point, so I could never deny her that.

"Maria."

All I can do is say her name, the one only I can call her, and let her know how I feel.

"I don't want you to do it."

Maria's face stiffens a bit.

"I can't stand the thought of you forgetting about me and leaving!"

".....Kazuki."

"You're terrible! You're the one who asked that I never lose sight of you, and now you're the one planning to lose sight of me! How could you do something like that?!" I shout.

Maria bites her lip and lowers her gaze. ".....But if I don't, Asami—"

I interrupt her by taking her right hand, and she looks at me with round eyes. "Asami will be fine."

“...Why?”

“You might not believe it yet, and you might get angry at me and think I’m sugarcoating the situation, but I have faith that she will.”

I squeeze her hand tight.

“There is no despair in our lives that can’t be undone.”

I realize her fingers are much slimmer than I thought. Not just her fingers, either. Maria’s entire profile is incredibly delicate, a perfect counterpoint to her spirit.

“Asami will be fine, even if the Week in the Mud is destroyed. There’s no way in hell that despair is the only fate that awaits her!”

“.....And you’re telling me to believe this?” she whispers.

I thought she would reject me.

First off, she’s seeking out Boxes. There’s no reason for her to accept a guy who believes in the ordinary day-to-day, when she actively tracks down the objects that destroy it.

But despite that, I still have faith in normal life.

“She just needs to find hope.”

“...What?”

“There may indeed be despair awaiting Asami in the future, but there will also be hope. I know of one source, at least.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“There’s someone out there who thinks Asami is the most valuable person in the world. Doesn’t that count as a little ray of light?”

I see the slightest hint of acknowledgment begin creeping into Maria’s features.

“...If nothing else happens, you may be right. But Asami will almost certainly be facing a lengthy prison sentence because of her actions.”

“Even so, I’m positive the two of them will be fine as long as they stick

together. If they can understand how precious they are to each other, they'll be okay. Don't you agree?"

"..."

"Maybe we're just assuming we know everything there is to know about Asami. There's still one more hour of 'Riko Asami' after this. It won't be too late if you make your decision after checking with her first... Well, don't only check with her. Help her find some hope, too. I know it's there."

Maria gives my hand a little squeeze.

"And while you're at it, give her a hand in finding some happiness that isn't an illusion." With that, I let go, and Maria looks down at her free hand. ".....U-uh, hey, it's still Golden Week, right?"

Maria frowns and looks up at the sudden question.

"Things didn't turn out so great, but I was really hoping to enjoy this break. But we do still have one more day off tomorrow, so..." I close my eyes for a moment, summon my courage, and spit it out. "So...let's go somewhere tomorrow. Um... Hey, I know! How about we get some strawberry tarts? They're your favorite, right?"

There's surprise in Maria's eyes. She stands motionless for a moment, but eventually, the tension leaves her face as if it were never there.

"Heh-heh... What was that all about?"

"Y-you don't want to go?"

"...This will mean you spent every day of Golden Week with me, you know."

"Huh? Is there something wrong with that?"

Maria tilts her head to the side and smirks. "If it doesn't bother you, then I'm fine with it."

"Really? You promise?"

Promise.

Her expression had only just softened, but it tenses again when she hears that word. Maria closes her eyes for a moment and ruminates on the meaning of the

word, then opens them again. Her mouth relaxes again and curves upward in a smile, and she speaks in a firm yet gentle tone.

“I promise. *I promise you a future where we can go and eat strawberry tarts tomorrow.*”

Yep, I know I have nothing to worry about.

And so I wait for that final possession to take place.

May 5 (Tuesday), 11:00 PM

None of it has ended.

Even though Maria Otonashi promised I would never undergo another switch, none of it has ended.

For some reason, I’m standing in the middle of the schoolyard. It’s pitch-black, and there’s nothing around. I know the main building of the school should be there, but I can’t see anything. There’s nothing. Nothing near me.

It’s just me and Riko Asami facing each other, alone.

I don’t understand. How did I end up like this? Where did Maria go?

“Long time no see,” Riko Asami says as she stands right in front of me.

I scowl. Why does this feel so off?

“Heh-heh, you probably don’t recognize me in this form. It’s O.”

“Huh?”

Their manner of speaking is clearly wrong, and that smile is charming in a way I could never hope to be. Yeah, that settles it. This person must be O.

“Why are you coming to me as Riko Asami...? Where’s Maria...?”

O’s answer is a smile as they walk toward me. I find myself edging away from this unknowable force. “Kazuki Hoshino said there was hope to be found, even in your life.” They extend their hand and push their fingers into my mouth.

“A-agh...?”

“Such a thing is impossible, I’m afraid.”

Riko Asami's fingers wriggle violently in my mouth, turning slimy with my saliva. It drips off them in globs, like I'm being forced to drink the fluids of some insect.

"The reason being that this is all it takes for you to learn what you taste like," O says, wearing my form. *"...It's the taste of scum."*

...Yes, I do taste it.

It's bitter, so bitter that it overwhelms me. This body belongs to Kazuki Hoshino, but somehow the muck slowly starts spreading past the inside of my mouth, propagating like a virus. My body is blackening, tainted by the color of sin. The foul sludge floods over me, violating me.

O withdraws their fingers from my mouth. I drop to my knees, and the filth within me sloshes with the movement.

"There's no helping your hatred. They made you a person"—the word makes me want to vomit—"capable of more bitter loathing than anyone. This is a truth that can never disappear. And that is why this scum will remain inside you for all eternity."

O places their hands upon my shoulders. I look up into the face of Riko Asami, the last one I want to see.

"There is no reason someone like you, who can never eradicate the muck inside her, can ever taste hope."

I'm well aware of this.

Hope will never be a part of my life. I've never felt it, not even once, and now that I'm corrupted—now that I've committed the sins I have—why would I ever experience it?

This is the end for Riko Asami.

"That's not true."

Still kneeling, I twist around to find the source of this voice behind me.

The one who called out is Maria Otonashi, gasping for breath. I see my older brother beside her. The one who'll never call me his sister again.

“You’re here sooner than expected.”

“What are you trying to pull by hurting her, O?!” Maria Otonashi shouts, her voice rough with anger.

“Heh-heh... Perhaps the best way to put it is that I wish to tear you away from Kazuki Hoshino. I was just taking the opportunity to do a few things until you arrived... Are you here with the intention of giving her hope, by any chance?”

“Yeah,” Maria Otonashi answers plainly.

O provides no reaction.

“Riko.”

Hearing that name from my brother feels very strange.

Oh. It’s the first time he’s used it, that’s why. This is the first time he’s ever called me by my name since I gained this body.

“Why now? I thought I wasn’t your sister anymore.”

“Now you know in your heart that you’re Riko Asami. That changes everything. Because you know it, I can say your name.”

I stay silent, so Ryu presses on.

“Hey, what’re you going to do now? The Week in the Mud is about to be destroyed. You’re going to become Riko Asami again. You and I will be separated. What are you going to do when all that happens?”

“I’m going to use Maria’s Box.”

“Asami. I’m sorry, but we have to cancel that plan,” Maria Otonashi interrupts.

“Huh...?” I instinctively turn toward her.

“I changed my mind after hearing Miyazaki out. I cannot let you use this Box now.”

She says it so confidently, without the slightest hint of shame at breaking her promise to me.

No, why would there be? It was always unthinkable for her to do something

as stupid as giving up her memories for me.

“Then I’ll just die.”

It’s the obvious answer. Now that things have reached this point, simply disappearing is the best ending I can hope for.

Ryu shouts at me in exasperation. “Do you honestly believe that ‘Riko Asami’ is yours alone?”

“...Huh?”

I am Riko Asami. I am mine. Anyone would understand that.

“Why do you look so surprised? You think you belong only to yourself? No way.” My brother still seems annoyed at my ignorance. “You belong to me, too. And that’s not all. You belong to Maria Otonashi, and to Kazuki Hoshino, too. So here’s the thing.”

He fixes me with a pointed stare.

“None of us are willing to let you die.”

I don’t understand what he means.

I can’t comprehend why my brother would say something like that with such kindness on his face.

“But how can I ever be forgiven for the horrible things I’ve done...? Death isn’t enough for me, you know? They both lost their lives because of me. That...”

“Asami.”

I stop short as I hear my name.

Maria Otonashi continues, “That’s the main reason I decided not to let you use my Box. I was mistaken when I said I would. Well, part of it was that Miyazaki was withholding information, but also I had misread the truth. *It was Ryu Miyazaki who actually committed the murders, wasn’t it?*”

.....No. True, the one who did it was Ryu, but I knew how things could turn out when I called him for help. All he did was fulfill my desires for me.

That’s why the sin is mine.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Riko. I wasn’t acting on your behalf when I killed them. I hated them both. Despised them. My emotions took over, and I lost control. That’s it.”

He’s lying.

I’m sure he really did hate them. But animosity alone wouldn’t have been enough to make him go through with it. He crossed that final line because he wanted to set me free. I’m the one who pulled the trigger.

“I thought about running away with you, but it wasn’t a realistic option. Neither of us is a legal adult, so we’d never be able to lead a proper life on the run. And even if we did, I can’t imagine we’d be happy being hunted every single day of our lives.” A faintly rueful smile appears on Ryu’s face. “I’m going to turn myself in, and I’m going to prove that you’re innocent. That’s the best choice available to me.”

My brother is attempting to wipe away my crimes, to take them all to prison with him.

“.....Why would you do that for me...?”

“Don’t make me explain it.”

I simply can’t figure out why. Why? We’re brother and sister, but we’re also separate individuals. Nothing good will come for him if he does this for me.

Ryu pulls something out of his bag and hands it to me.

I accept it wordlessly. It could be my imagination, but I recognize this texture. I look down to see what exactly he gave me.

“...Oh.”

I can’t contain my surprise.

I thought it was ruined. I thought everything I ever cherished had been spoiled forever.

“I washed it, put in some stuffing, and stitched it up. That’s all. I mean, it’s not enough to make it as good as new, but it is fixed, right?”

It’s my rabbit plushie.

The one Ryu won for me from the crane game.

“Ah...aahhh...”

I fall to my knees on the spot. I can't hold back the sobs escaping me or the tears running down my face, and just the tiniest bit of the filth inside me is flowing out with them. Not all of it, of course. I'll still be carrying it with me... But for now, at least, some of it is washing away.

Maybe...

Just maybe...

“.....Ryu.”

...I never needed to make a wish with the Box at all. Maybe I failed to see that.

After all, now I'm sure...

...my wish had already come true.

“I'm sorry, Ryu. I'm so sorry all of this happened because of me.”

My brother sacrificed himself because I couldn't figure it out. None of this would have happened if I had only been able to love myself.

“Next time, I'll save you.” I wipe away my tears and climb to my feet. Ryu is looking at me with a bit of surprise. “I'll save you when you're suffering...and I'll be waiting for you. I'll always be there, waiting for the day we can stand together again.”

My voice and my body are trembling, and my smile is a bit forced, but I tell him clearly.

“I'll be waiting for you as Riko Asami.”

My brother is motionless for a moment, eyes wide in shock, but gradually, his face softens.

There's a warmth in his eyes that wasn't there yesterday.

“I...” He answers with a smile. “I was too late. Or that's what I've always thought. But I'm beginning to get the feeling that maybe...I did make it in time.”

I'll never be able to say that I'm glad things turned out this way. My brother

and I will always hate our past, until the day we die.

But despite it, we've found how we can make it through.

I have no doubt of that now.

Quietly watching us, Maria Otonashi nods with a smile.

"I was able to keep my promise to Kazuki," she whispers before her smile vanishes and she pins O with a steely glare.

"Now, hand over the Box."

O nods, their smile never once slipping.

My Box, the Week in the Mud, will end now. O reaches a hand up to Riko Asami's eye and touches her eyeball. I can feel it, even though I'm not the one being touched.

O digs their fingers in deep, as if they intend to pluck out the eye. Unable to bear the pain, I cry out briefly and squeeze my eyes shut. It hurts! ...But while it is extremely painful, I can tell this is the way it needs to be. This is how it should be. And that's why I endure the crushing agony in my eye.

The pain goes away, and I look at O again.

They've finished whatever it was they were doing.

My eye is undamaged, and O is holding a Box that resembles a small, blackened bullet in the palm of their hand.

"I wonder if this proves Kazuki Hoshino's claim that 'there is no despair in life that can't be undone'?"

".....Maybe this time, at least."

"Heh-heh... I see. I suppose that's the only thing you can say. That statement is a denial of your very being as a Box, after all. It seems Kazuki has a knack for making heartless comments, too."

With a sharp glare O's way, Maria Otonashi roughly snatches the Box out of their hand. "Now I can go back to Kazuki. That's all that matters."

"Aren't you merely delaying the inevitable? You still don't intend to decide between being Maria Otonashi or remaining Aya Otonashi?"

“What a stupid question.” Maria Otonashi looks down at the Week in the Mud resting in her hand. She bites down hard on her lip, as if filled with loathing for the Box. “The answer to that was set in stone long ago.”

“You’re probably right.” O responds quickly with obvious disinterest.

“I am a Box.”

She releases her lip and continues, *“There is no way I can ever go back to being the person I was before I became a Box.”*

Her eyes are so strong.

This is the expression of the fabrication I’ve revered all this time.

“That’s why it’s better if I maintain the same personality I have had since then. If that means choosing to remain Aya Otonashi, so be it.”

“If so, then why are you still with Kazuki Hoshino?”

“...”

Silence overtakes her.

“Doesn’t that only make things more difficult for you? Wasn’t that your motivation in allowing Riko Asami to use your Box?”

“...What’re you talking about? I have no idea what you mean.”

“Heh-heh, perhaps the curse of that realm of endless repetition still hangs over you. Indeed, Kasumi Mogi would have been an exceptionally powerful foe for you.”

“.....Hmph.” She examines the Box again, rolling it around in her hand. “.....I was set on doing it. It didn’t take long. But then that damn Kazuki had to go and say he didn’t want me to...,” she softly whispers as sadness clouds her features for a moment.

But it’s gone in an instant. Once again, she dons the visage of the perfect creation, the one I find so utterly beautiful.

Maria Otonashi has already granted the wish of the Week in the Mud through sheer willpower alone—what’s going through her mind as she watches me and my Box?

Chewing her lip yet again, she takes one final look at the tiny bullet-shaped Box...

...and then, with a touch of sadness, crushes the Week in the Mud in her fist.

May 5 (Tuesday), 11:56 PM

There something markedly different about the way I feel when I wake up this time. My head feels oddly refreshed, like every last nook and cranny is clear. It makes me especially aware of how much “Riko Asami” took from me earlier.

I check the time on my phone.

11:57 PM.

I’m me, even though the hour of eleven PM has always been “Riko Asami’s,” since the very first day.

It’s over.

But before my emotions have the chance to wash over me, something seizes me.

“Huh?! Ah... M-Maria...?”

Is she hugging me? To be clear, this is not a gentle embrace of appreciation for my weeklong battle. It’s a powerful vise clinging to me for dear life.

“Wh-what’s gotten into you?”

She hears me but doesn’t answer.

It seems I have no choice but to stay here at her mercy for the time being. I can’t see Maria’s face.

“.....Call me that name, one more time.”

“Huh?”

“Call me ‘Maria’ one more time.”

“.....Okay, M-Maria.”

“.....Again.”

“Maria.”

“.....”

Silence.

“It’s your fault.” Maria abruptly switches gears. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m only with you because it allows me to meet O. There is no significance to our relationship beyond that. And yet you keep getting carried away and doing things nobody asked you to do. I went through a lot of pain this time, and it’s all your fault.”

“.....I’m not sure what you’re getting at, but don’t you think that’s really mean?”

“It’s the truth, idiot,” she retorts, pushing me away.

So now she’s getting violent?

What’s more, for some reason she has a huge grin on her face.

“Now then, let’s go.”

“Huh? Where are we going?”

“What’re you playing dumb for? Yesterday, I promised you we would go out for some strawberry tarts tomorrow.”

“...Well, that’s what I said, but it’s still the fifth...”

“Check the time.”

I pull out my phone as ordered.

12:00 AM.

The date has changed.

“I know a late-night diner that has strawberry tarts. Let’s go there.”

“U-uh? That’s not the problem... Normally, when people say ‘tomorrow,’ they mean after they sleep and wake up...”

“What’re you blabbering about? Let’s get moving.” Maria grabs me by the hand.

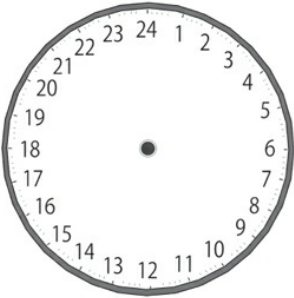
Oh man... Maybe I shouldn’t have made that promise. Why do I get the feeling she’s going to drag me around all day tomorrow, too?

...Well, whatever.

I don't mind at all.

As Maria leads me off, I spare a glance back at the two we left in the middle of the schoolyard.

I see a happy brother and sister, smiling and holding each other's hands.





May 18 (Monday)

I scan the classroom, balling up the wrapper of a salted-beef-tongue-flavored Umaibo. Nothing appears to be out of the ordinary with my classmates. Everyone does seem a bit restless, but that's probably because we have midterms coming up tomorrow.

"Yo, Kazu!"

"Ow!"

Kokone greets me with a karate chop.

".....Morning."

"So the other day, I was just walking around Shibuya..."

"Okay...?"

Kokone seems awfully pleased with herself as she suddenly launches into her story. "I was gonna head to Marui and maybe hit up HMV to check out some albums, you know? But then it was like, everyone simply couldn't ignore my charms, such as these E cups here."

When did she get another size?

Kokone opens a fashion magazine on my desk and points to something. It's a picture of her smiling on the street.

"Oh, wow!"

It's an honest reaction, and Kokone looks even more proud. "Ha-ha-ha, it just so happens I got stopped five times in only two hours, if you include the guys trying to chat me up. I turned them all down, but sometimes they're scouts for modeling agencies, you know... Phew... The world won't leave me be. So, how about this picture? Whatcha think?"

".....Yeah, it's pretty good."

"Right? Take a look at my quote, too. *A couple of minutes ago, I thought the strings of my hoodie were my headphones and put them in my ears.* ☆ C'mon, it's the perfect quote for that klutzy appeal. I'm adorable."

“Yep.”

If I say too much, this could drag on even longer, so it’s best to go with the flow.

Kokone suddenly calls out Haruaki, who watches the scene with disgust. “... Got something to say, Haru?”

“Not really. Just that all this showboating is making me sick.”

“...Well, wearing jerseys all the time makes *me* sick.”

“What’d you say? Don’t go talking smack about my Adidas!”

“I’m not talking smack about your Adidas; I’m talking smack about you.”

I can’t suppress a smile as I watch them go at it.

It’s great. These little verbal sparring matches are another sign that my life is returning to normal.

The truth is, things almost reached the point where I never could have talked with my friends like this again. We might have destroyed the Week in the Mud, but that didn’t erase anything that had happened during that period. The fact that I told Kokone I loved her would never go away.

It was all thanks to some quick thinking on Maria’s part that our relationship allows us to interact like this again.

I think about the tightrope walking I had to do back in Mogi’s hospital room.



It’s noon on the ninth.

Sitting on the white bed is Kasumi Mogi, the pajama-clad girl from the picture I’ve seen so many times on my phone. Standing next to her is Kokone, wearing her hair down today.

Both of them are glowering angrily at me.

I’m well aware of this, so I’m staring intently at the mattress in an effort to avoid eye contact with either of them. I can see Maria’s legs out of the corner of my eye.

...I wonder, is this what people mean when they say love is a battlefield?

“Tell me what’s going on, Hoshino,” Mogi says, calmly but sharply, and I scratch my head. “You told Koko you liked her, even though you’re going out with Otonashi? Why would you do that? Do you just not care...?”

Kokone had apparently asked her good friend Mogi for advice when I made my confession to her, which is why I’ve been summoned here.

“Koko told me you and Otonashi were close, but...from what I hear, it sounds like you two are really in a relationship.”

“Uh, well...”

“.....If you were going out with her, you should’ve said something..... I guess it was silly of me to think we had something going on.....”

The sharp edge fades from Mogi’s voice. Her expression is unmistakably sad.

“Explain yourself, Hoshino!” Kokone’s voice is rough with anger.

“Well, we’re not... I mean, we never, like, you know...”

“You never what?! I—I didn’t ask you if you’d done *that* or not! What a lech...”

“That’s not what I’m saying! You’re getting it all wrong!”

“As if I’d believe you now! I can’t believe you’d say something like that in front of Otonashi! I mean, you’re on a first-name basis and everything!”

All the shouting is starting to draw glances from others in the ward. Even the nurses are keeping a wary eye on our (seemingly) serious and important conversation and giving us a wide berth... Too bad they aren’t coming to tell us to keep it down.

Kokone exhales loudly and gives Maria an intense glare. “...Don’t you have anything to say to Kazu? You don’t seem to care in the slightest about what he said to me.”

“Hmph..... Hmm.” Maria crosses her arms in response to Kokone’s accusation. She glances over at me, the corner of her mouth twitching upward. ...*I’ve got a really bad feeling about this.*

“Does his confession to you bother me? There’s no reason it should.”

“...Why?”

“Because I made him do it.”

Everyone is frozen solid. Me too, of course.

Okay, what have you gone and said now, Maria...?

“.....What for? You put Kazu up to it when he said that to me?”

“That’s right.”

“K-Kazu, what the hell is this?” “Hoshino, I don’t understand!”

I’d love to know, myself.

“Kazuki’s attempts will just make the situation even messier, so I’ll explain for him,” Maria replies, still smiling faintly. “There is one fact I need to get out of the way first, which is that Kazuki dumped me.”

Kokone and Mogi both stare at me in shock. *H-hey, it’s not like I know what’s going on, either!*

“Yes, and he told me I meant less than nothing to him.”

I would never say something like that to anyone!

“How awful... How could you be so arrogant? I hope you curl up and die, Kazu!”

“I—I agree; that’s really disgusting.”

“No, I.....”

I want to explain everything, but I’m not sure what Maria has planned yet, so I fall silent.

“I couldn’t understand why he cast me aside so callously. If he liked someone else, it might not be enough for me to let go of my feelings for him, but it would at least explain why he did it. So I asked him if he had feelings for someone.”

“A-and then he said he loves me?!”

“That’s right. After a long pause, he said your name.”

Kokone suddenly flushes bright red and bashful at Maria's revelation. In contrast, Mogi turns a sickly green next to her... It reminds me of a traffic signal.

"Still, I couldn't quite believe it when it was your name he said. You two always seemed like you were just friends to me. I told him the only way I would accept it was if he confessed his feelings to you in front of me right then and there."

"So then Hoshino told Koko he liked her...," Mogi whispers. The tears in her eyes are about to overflow.

Kokone's face is still red, but she casts a worried sidelong glance at her friend.

.....Come on, Maria, what're you trying to do here.....?!

"But anyway, just before we arrived here, Kazuki took back his claim that he likes you."

"WHAAAT?!" Kokone roars.

"K-Kokone, we're in the hospital."

"Shut it, you stupid, fickle bastard."

"....."

"Here's the bottom line: Kazuki told me he liked you as a spur-of-the-moment excuse to get me off his back. Once the lie was told and I'd threatened him to prove it by actually confessing his feelings to you, he couldn't take it back."

"Hmm... That does explain it, but... But still! That was a terrible thing to do to me!"

"I would take it more as a sign of how much he trusts you. Since the two of you are friends, I think he must have believed you would forgive him once he apologized."

"Hmm..."

"Besides, even in the event you didn't understand, it wouldn't be an altogether bad thing, would it?"

"Huh?!" Kokone blushes again.

...Hey, that last bit was unnecessary, Maria.

“However, that doesn’t change the fact that we dragged you into this mess. Kazuki and I both feel terrible about it. Please forgive us.”

“I-I’m sorry. I really am...”

I choose that moment for my apology.

Kokone gives me a shrewd look, her cheeks still a bit red. “.....Do you feel bad for what you did?”

“Y-yeah. I’m sorry.”

Now that I’ve expressed my regret, Kokone purses her lips and states her verdict. “Fine. I’ll forgive you, but never do that again! I may be used to guys saying they love me left and right, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t come as a shock. My mind was racing so fast I couldn’t get to sleep that night!”

“So you’re used to it.”

“Heh, I had two during my first year of school here... But that doesn’t matter! Are you sure you’ve learned your lesson?!”

“S-sorry. I’ll behave myself from now on...”

Kokone is yelling, but her smile lets me know she’s calmed down.

Like me, all she really wants is for our friendship to go back to normal.

As long as we can maintain our normal routine, our peaceful day-to-day won’t be shattered again so easily.

“Anyway, um, I think we’ll be going.”

As I say this, I look at Maria and make to leave the room... To be honest, I’m slightly embarrassed about the audience we’ve drawn, and I’d like to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Wait.”

“...What’s up, Mogi?”

“Um, well... You dumped Otonashi, right? I’m just wondering—why are you still together, then? Are you sure you aren’t going out anymore?” Mogi’s voice is wavering.

“Uh... Well, yeah.”

She searches our faces and then lowers her eyes. “.....Ugh, I hope I get out of here soon. I’ve got to get back to school. This is so uncomfortable... It makes me really anxious...”

“D-don’t worry, Kasumi! I’ll keep an eye on him for you!”

Mogi’s face fills with happiness at Kokone’s declaration. “...Koko, when Otonashi said it wouldn’t be a bad thing if you misunderstood, you didn’t seem too upset.”

“Y-yes, I was!”

Mogi gives me a tearful glare. “Hoshino, you idiot!”

“Uh...”

“Why couldn’t your false confession have been to me and not Koko?!”

Uh...is that really what’s bothering you?



It’s lunchtime.

Maria and I are sitting across from each other at a table in the cafeteria. She’s eating ramen that probably tastes like rubber with a blank look on her face.

She sure seemed happy when she ate that strawberry tart the other day. When I tried to take a picture, she gave me a full-on punch and polished it off with a dark scowl.

“Do you want to come by my place today, Kazuki?” she asks.

The boy next to me spits out a mouthful of fried rice.

“I was thinking maybe the library would be good today, but I’m not sure.”

“Well, if that’s what you want, I’m okay with it.”

I’ve been going to Maria’s house for the last two days. We aren’t just hanging out; Maria, the reigning top student of our school, has been tutoring me for our upcoming exams.

As a second-year, though, I’m not sure how I feel about a first-year tutoring

me...

“So you won’t stop by, then. Oh well, I’ve still got quite a bit of stew left over, but I guess I can finish it all myself.”

“...I thought it tasted good.”

“I didn’t ask what you thought.”

She was so considerate before, but now the ice is back.

“Still...”

If she heard this conversation, let alone that I’d been going over to Maria’s place, I’m sure she’d be angry, I think, remembering the girl who always sat next to Maria at lunch up until two weeks ago.

Things were pretty much back to normal. Mogi’s been a little grumpy whenever I visit her at the hospital, and Daiya still won’t really talk to me, but I feel like I almost have the comfortable life I once knew back.

Well, I say that, but Riko Asami and Ryu Miyazaki are no longer a part of it.

Our Golden Week ended up being extended for four more days, and class didn’t resume until the eleventh.

This was because a student at our school was suspected of murder. Our principal had appeared on TV while we were on break, saying he had always found Miyazaki to be a dedicated student with excellent grades.

The first day after the holiday ended was tough. The media and their cameras were everywhere, and class was like something out of a nightmare with girls sobbing openly. Our homeroom was unrecognizable.

But after a week or so, things went back to normal.

Naturally, it became taboo to even mention “Ryu Miyazaki” among our class. His name was forcibly tied to the murders and, in a sense, the disruption of our regular lives. It wasn’t even allowed to exist among us if we wanted to maintain the usual flow of things.

Of course, we’ll always remember Miyazaki. There’s no way we could ever forget him. But he’s not a part of our conversations anymore.

Miyazaki will never return to the normal life I know.

His younger sister, Riko Asami, is no exception, either.

The moment the murders became public knowledge, she no longer had any place here. None of our classmates had been aware before that Ryu Miyazaki and Riko Asami were brother and sister, but now the entire country knows. Her address and photo ended up on major websites, and though she should have been treated as a relative of the victims, any place she had in life here was destroyed by the media and the prying eyes of the general public.

Asami dropped out of school before any of us noticed.

“Why the faraway look, Kazuki?” Maria asks, having finished her ramen while I was distracted.

“Uh, no, it’s nothing...”

“You must have been thinking about Asami... I swear, she’s always on your mind, isn’t she?”

“Stop saying it like that. People will get the wrong idea...”

Maria smiles contentedly at my discomfort. There’s no doubt about it now. She is definitely a sadist. Actually, I already knew that.

“You don’t need to worry about Asami. You know that, right?” she says, still smiling.

Her words bring a smile to my face, too, and I nod.

That’s right—I don’t have anything to worry about.

I pull out my phone and open the last voice memo.

“Good morning, Kazuki Hoshino. No, good afternoon, or maybe it’s good evening?”

It’s the exact same greeting she gave me at the beginning, word for word. But the voice isn’t Kazuki Hoshino’s, but rather a girl’s.

It belongs to Riko Asami.

If the date is as the file states, then the recording was made at two in the morning on the sixth, not long after I left the diner with Maria. I’m not sure

when Maria nicked it, but she must have decided to give my phone to Asami without asking.

That way, she could record this message.

“What should I say? Maybe, ‘I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble’? If words were all it would take to earn your forgiveness, I’d say as many as I need to. But I know that won’t be enough. After everything I did to you, you can never forgive me, I know.”

That’s not true at all. Besides, carrying a grudge around with me like that would just get in the way of my average life.

“I doubt you’ll be able to forgive my brother, either, no matter what punishment he receives for his crimes. He’ll probably serve ten or twenty years, maybe even longer, but that doesn’t mean what he did will be forgiven once he’s free. My brother did it on my behalf, but it was wrong. He’ll feel the weight of it more and more as time goes on, I’m sure. And I’m sure his heart will break, over and over. But don’t worry. Ryu still told me that he made it in time, despite knowing all of this.”

Her voice is clear and optimistic, without any hints that this is just a facade. Asami is unmistakably speaking from her heart.

“I’ll be fine from here on out, too. I finally understand, after all. I understand perfectly. I won’t lose sight of the truth again.”

She must have known better than anyone that there would be tough times ahead for her. She must have already known she would never be able to come back to this school.

And then, she says it.

“I am Riko Asami.”

The message ends.

I have no idea what sort of hardships she’ll face. But I’m certain she will never claim that she’s no one, or say anything similar, ever again.

That’s how I know she’s going to be okay.

I’m positive she’ll be okay.

Asami didn't tell Maria or anyone else where she was going. Though that means it's just a baseless rumor, there is one bit of gossip I've heard several times:

Riko Asami is working a job on a farm in Hokkaido where she lives on-site.

If that's true, I'm glad. Up there, she can build a place for Miyazaki to come home to.

I suppose it's my nature as an optimist that makes me so confident she can do it. But I still believe it.

I can still believe that joy and laughter will be part of their lives again for both of them.

"Yep, I knew you'd be with Otonashi."

Those words jolt me out of my little reverie. I feel like I haven't heard that voice in a while. I look up.

It's Daiya.

Though we haven't spoken since he hit me, Daiya plops down next to Maria as if nothing ever happened.

.....*Wh-what does he want?* Is he getting ready to say he wants to be friends again? That's fine if it's true, but Daiya isn't the type to be so straightforward about it.

"Kazuki."

"Y-yeah?"

"I heard about why you've been acting so weird."

I guess he must have heard about what went down in the hospital room from Kokone or someone.

Daiya flashes a bold grin at me as I sit there stunned.

I suddenly notice something. Before, only Daiya's left ear was pierced, but now the right one is, too.

And that's when he delivers the sucker punch.

“You’re mixed up with O, aren’t you?”

AFTERWORD

Hello, Eiji Mikage here.

I apologize for the long wait after the first book. I really wanted to get the next one out fast, since the story of the first book left some room as to whether there would be more, but... To be honest, even I don't really know why it took this long.

Now then, "Eiji Mikage" is, naturally, my pen name. I occasionally get asked about its origins, but really I just came up with it off the top of my head, so I always end up fumbling over how to answer.

Regardless, random idea or not, it's my nom de plume now.

I go by this among my editors, too, as well as among my fellow authors. Almost none of them know my real name. When I call the editorial department, I even state my name as "author Eiji Mikage." Even now, I dunno—it feels kinda strange...

I'm sure that all of you reading my work know me only as "Eiji Mikage," too.

This may not be the best way to put it, but to my readers, "Eiji Mikage" isn't a human, but a machine that writes books. The only thing people want from me is to pump out good stories.

If you were to ask me whether I do everything in my power to make this happen, I wouldn't be able to answer strongly in the affirmative. I'm weak, and I often think that I have to discipline myself more if I want to become an ideal author in the eyes of my readers.

Now it's time for the acknowledgments.

To the illustrator, Tetsuo-san, formerly known as 415, I say thank you very much for supplying some amazing art again. When I told you about the second

book and said, “Maria puts Kazuki in handcuffs while she’s wearing only a button-up shirt and panties!” your response was very straightforward: “Sounds perverted.” I’ll never forget that.

To my editor Kawamoto-san, thank you very much for sticking with me through these byzantine stories each time. You truly are a great help. Volume 3 is going to be even more convoluted, so you’ve got some tough times ahead! (As if it’s not my problem.)

And then I would like to express my gratitude to all the readers who hung with me through Volume 2. I hope you’ll come along for the ride on the next one.

Until then, see you later!

Eiji Mikage

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